ARUN SHOURIE

HARVESTING OUR SOULS

Missionaries, their design, their claims

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For our parents
For our Adit
For Anita

Taat maat guru sakha tu....

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Introduction

Every one in India has the fullest freedom to preach his point of view. Religious groups and individual missionaries enjoy this right as fully as others.

These groups and individuals – in particular Islamic and Christian groups and missionaries – claim a right that goes far beyond preaching. They claim that they have the right, indeed that it is their duty to convert others to their religion. From this they proceed to denounce even so elementary a requirement that fraud and allurement must not be used to secure conversions, they insist that it is a violation of their fundamental rights, that it suppresses the religious freedom which the Constitution guarantees them, that it is nothing but "fascism". Moreover, they insist that they have the right not just to convert an individual at a time, they claim that they have the right to convert *en masse*.

As to the means they deploy for the purpose – the money that is sent from abroad, the allurements by which the innocent are enticed, the way facts are suppressed and falsehood is insinuated – a question has but to be raised, and they raise a din, "Communalism, fascism, trampling on our fundamental right...."

The conversion of even an individual causes grave disruption. His family is torn apart. Tensions erupt in the community. This is all the more so because after converting him, in several instances during the conversion proceedings themselves, the converters make the person do and say things that grievously offend the original community of the person: the individual is led to not just repudiate but

denounce gods and rituals in which he has grown up, to do things which are forbidden in his original religion or community – for instance, to eat flesh which is prohibited.

These things do not happen accidentally. They are designed. On the one hand, to cut – finally, dramatically, with a psychological violence – such residual cords which may still survive in the individual's mind. On the other, their object is to make it that much more difficult for the individual to revert to his original community: what the person has done – the abuse he may have hurled at the local god or goddess, the food he may have eaten in the feast after the ceremony – gets known swiftly to his family and community, information about it is deliberately passed to the family and community. Angered, the latter distance themselves from the man. And there is the other side: as the man is no longer able to return to his community and family, he becomes completely dependent on his new "family" and "community".

The discord and animosities that result had led Swami Vivekananda to warn a hundred years ago, "Every man going out of the Hindu pale is not only a man less, but an enemy the more."[1]

A mighty reaction is building up in India against conversions: few events have propelled Hindus in the South to think as Hindus as did the mass conversions to Islam in Meenakshipuram, few developments have alarmed citizens as the systematic targeting by Christian missionaries of people in the Northeast, and in our tribal areas.

Conversion is the main activity of church groups, it is their principal business. But the moment they are asked about it, they deny that they are engaged in it on any scale of consequence. In part this book deals with their designs in this

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[1] *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda,* Advaita Ashram, Calcutta, 1979, Volume V, pp. 233-35, for the text of the Swami's interview to the editor of *Prabuddha Bharat,* in which Swami Vivekananda stated that arrangements must be made to receive back into Hinduism those who had been converted to Christianity and Islam.

regard, and the consequences which are bound to follow from it.

There is another, though allied problem. To convert us, missionaries have worked for five hundred years to undermine our reverence for our gods and scriptures. Till the early 1950s the denunciations used to be open, shrill, abusive. Today the slander is sophisticated, the untruths are spoken rather than written. But they are spread even more systematically, through an even wider array of devices, by using an ever more plentiful chest. I have accordingly applied one or two of the same criteria which they used to scandalize our scriptures and gods to (i) the scripture they offer instead, (ii) the God that scripture describes, and (iii) the Son of that God which that scripture describes.

The one thing I hope that the reader of this book will do is to rush to the scriptures of these religions, and read them himself – diligently, thoroughly. And to study the histories that record what the effort of the adherents of these religions to bring about the order which their scriptures ordain has wrought for mankind. That will be enough to make him see through most of the claims of the missionaries.

As for missionaries, they may feel upset at these facts being set out – all the more so because the facts are incontrovertible, taken as they are from their own scriptures, from their own Decrees and publications. Moreover, these are facts which, though they are common knowledge and widely acknowledged in Europe and America, the missionaries assiduously keep from converts and potential converts in India. But instead of working up a rage, they should reflect on the five hundred years of calumny which their fellow professionals have heaped on our scriptures and religion. How true the warning and counsel turn out to have been in retrospect which their Lord himself had given them:

> Judge not, that ye be not judged.
> For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what

measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again.
And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considereth not the beam that is in thine own eye?
Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me pull out the mote out of thine eye; and, behold, a beam is in thine own eye?
Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye.[2]

If only missionaries had remembered these words while slandering our gods and scriptures for five hundred years. If only they were to heed them today.

Finally, there is the question that is so often asked of many of us: "You studied in a missionary school, in a missionary college. Did anyone try to convert you?" Turn the question around, as Gandhiji used to do. Why is it that instead of trying to convert the educated, instead of trying to convert those who can think for themselves, those who can reflect on the claims being advanced on behalf of a religion other than their own, why is it that instead of targeting *them*, missionaries target the illiterate tribal?

This book provides one answer: were they to target even you and me, to say nothing of a Gandhiji, we would ask them for answers to the sort of questions that spring from what is set out here.

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[2]*Matthew*, 7.1-5.

Their design

2

An echo chamber

If you had been in India in late 1998-early 1999, and the English-language "national" newspapers had been your source of information about what was going on, you would have concluded that an extensive, well-coordinated pogrom was on, that maniacal Hindu groups were going round raping nuns, attacking missionaries, burning down churches.

What was happening in fact? What do we know now about the incidents by which that miasma was created?

Newspapers and TV channels reported nine sets of incidents. The one that most blackened the name of the country initially was the rape of four nuns in Jhabua, Madhya Pradesh. The Madhya Pradesh Government completed investigations some months ago, and arrested the suspects. It turns out that there are as many Christians in the wretched lot as non-Christians, and that the nuns had been assaulted not because of any religious hatred or impulse, but because of local animosities – two groups were contending with each other, one side concluded that the local church people were siding with the other group, and decided to teach them a lesson. Months have passed since the investigations were completed, and the accused were taken into custody. Not one of the organizations and publications which had pasted the rapes on Hindu fundamentalists has done anything – not the littlest thing – to ensure that the accused are tried swiftly.

"Jhabua re-enacted in Jhajjar," proclaimed a four-column headline of *The Hindustan Times* in regard to the second incident. It reported – on the authority of one of the chief propagandists of Christian organizations, he also doubles up

as an Editor of an afternoon paper in Delhi – that nuns in Jhajjar, Haryana had been set upon and molested. *The Observer of Business and Politics* sent its correspondents to follow up the story. They found that the story was a complete fabrication. The nuns had arrived in Jhajjar some two-three years earlier. They had started teaching sewing to the local girls – we will hear more about setting up such services as we proceed. There was an election for the local *mahila mandal.* Two groups were locked in a spirited contest as through the *mandal* they could get control over the profitable tailoring business. The nuns began to espouse the candidate of one group. Members of the other group came, shouted at them, remonstrated with them, and asked them to stay out of local rivalries. No one was molested. The entire conversation with the nuns was taped by reporters of *The Observer of Business and Politics.* The paper published the facts. Neither the propagandist-Editor nor *The Hindustan Times* returned to the story they had played up so much.

The third incident originated in a story put out by Associated Press. An American doctor, Dr. John Sylvester, working in Allahabad has been attacked by Hindu fundamentalists, the agency reported, he has had to seek shelter in a Baptist Church, his clinic has been broken up.... And the facts? Sylvester is not a medical doctor, he has a Ph.D. in Economics. He is not an American, his wife is. He has no clinic, instead he runs two schools. Neither he nor his wife, nor their schools had ever been attacked. But the assault was the talk in atrocity-circles: in the papers, on Internet.

In the fourth incident, a nun was said to have been raped in Baripada, Orissa. Again, in less than a flash the incident was all over – in the papers, on TV, on Internet. The local missionary was in the forefront in giving it currency: he declared that "local communal outfits" were the ones who had raped the lady. Everyone ran with this, and the rape was projected as a continuation of the attacks by Bajrang Dal

types on helpless Christians. The medical examination disclosed no sign of rape, not even of struggle: the marks were reported to be "superficial and self-inflicted". Police were also struck by a telling detail. The lady was asked for the garments she had been wearing – these were the items that were most likely to have had the decisive evidence to nail the culprits: semen and all. The investigators were told that all the clothes had been burnt immediately after the assault. Police and district officials were said to be non-plussed about how to handle the matter – lest the state government take umbrage. By July, 1999, the Wadhwa Commission had looked into this incident, among others. What did his inquiry reveal?

One Sister Jacqueline Mary was said to have been raped on 3 February, 1999. "Orissa nun raped in moving car," the headlines declared, Justice Wadhwa records. "Orissa's second stain: nun raped," shouted the *Indian Express*. "Nun gangraped by men in sari in Orissa," hollered *The Telegraph*. The village "has become the rallying point of Christians of the area," the papers proclaimed. "The press, on the basis of some statement made by the pastor of the Church highlighted the role of some Hindu fundamentalist organizations," writes Justice Wadhwa. "....It was termed as a planned attack on the church. It was said that there was a role of communal forces.... Electronic media was not far behind. It was highlighted as an anti-Christian attack." "Do not treat this as an isolated incident," teachers of a Christian convent school told correspondents. "A communal conspiracy is suspected to be behind the rape."

There indeed was a conspiracy it turns out, and a communal one at that. The whole thing was a concoction – by those whose agenda it is to paint Hindus as communalists on the rampage, and the RSS, BJP, etc., as organizations which are orchestrating a "pogrom". "Investigations, however, revealed that what Sister Mary said in the FIR was not true," records Justice Wadhwa. "It was a made-up story.

Investigations found that there was in fact no rape of Sister Mary.... B. B. Panda, D(irector) G(eneral) (of) P(olice) stated that the 'rape of the nun' case was projected and highlighted all over the world and was also projected as an attack on Christians when in fact it was not true, and the case turned out to be false."

In the fifth incident, a young girl and boy were found murdered in Kandhamal, also in Orissa. The murders had taken place in a remote forest. Local officials said that there seemed to be no communal angle to the murders, but our papers and those abroad portrayed them to be part of continuing attacks on Christians by militant Hindus. The incident got redoubled prominence: it became a butt in the factional war within Congress – local Congressmen found in it the ultimate weapon in their efforts to replace J.B. Patnaik, the then Chief Minister of Orissa. Justice Wadhwa looked into this incident also. And what did he find?

On 7 February, 1999, two children, aged 10 and 19, were found murdered, a third had sustained injuries. "This incident again attracted a great deal of publicity in the media, including electronic media," writes Justice Wadhwa. "Newspapers came up with the headings, 'Two Christians killed, one injured in Orissa,' '2 tribal Christians done to death in Kandhamal,' and 'Orissa hunts for Christians' killer.' Additional D.G.P. John Nayak reportedly said that the communal angle to the attempted rape and murder could not be ruled out...." "A certain political party even blamed the State and Central Governments," Justice Wadhwa recalls, "and stated that the inaction of the State Government in the Manoharpur missionary killing incident [the killing of Staines and his sons to which we shall come in a moment] and the alleged rape of the nun in Baripada encouraged miscreants to commit yet another crime in Kandhamal." "In short", he concludes, "as per various reports that appeared in the newspapers, the incident was taken as an attack on the Christians."

"Ultimately investigation revealed that the crime was committed by a relative of the victims who was also a Christian," the Commission notes. The killings seemed to have been triggered by the usual, not just local but personal jealousies. I would sincerely request you to scour the back-issues of your papers, and compare the prominence that was given to news of the murders originally with the way news of the suspect having been found, of his having confessed to the crime was treated, and whether any paper even reported the conclusion which Justice Wadhwa reached on the case after sifting the evidence.

Another incident that became the talk in atrocity-circles was one that occurred on 8 December, 1998. Tribals attacked the police station at Udaygiri, stormed the jail, dragged two undertrial prisoners out, and lynched them to death in front of the police station. After that, they burnt houses belonging to members of a particular caste, Pana. The incident too was projected as a Hindu-Christian encounter. Justice Wadhwa sets out the facts about what actually happened. The incident had nothing to do with Hindus and Christians. The tribals were being harassed by criminals who happened to be from some particular caste, the Pana caste. The police had been doing nothing. One day some tribals were proceeding to seek employment. The criminals robbed them of all their cash. That ignited the flash. The two who were dragged out of jail, as well the ones whose houses were burnt happened to belong to this Pana caste, and the mob that went for them consisted of tribals who had been agitated at the police doing nothing to bring the criminals to book. But a Hindu-Christian clash it became!

In yet another incident – this one occurred in mid-March, 1999 – Hindus, a minority in the village, were pictured as having sparked off Hindu-Christian clashes in village Ranalai, Orissa. In his report, Justice Wadhwa reconstructs the sequence of events. Christians painted a large Cross on a hillock. Some Hindus transfigured it into a *Trishul*. A Peace

Committee consisting of representatives from both communities decided that there would be neither a Cross nor a *Trishul*. Next day, Hindus went and erased the sign. Christians alleged that while returning, Hindus shouted slogans proclaiming victory. Tension mounted. While trying to control the situation, a Circle Inspector of the police was manhandled by Christians. He registered a First Information Report against three of them. Houses of Christians were said to have been burned down. Cross-complaints were filed by Hindus and Christians – each side accused the other.

The Minorities Commission sent a team, and declared that seeds of the trouble had been sown a few months earlier, that BJP men had gone and inflamed feelings of local Hindus and instructed them to convert the Cross into a *Trishul*. As for the incidents and tension, it came to the conclusion it always reaches: the Hindus had created the trouble.

Justice Wadhwa observes, "These findings are without examining any person on oath or receiving evidence on affidavits." The Minorities Commission had also stigmatized the State Government for inaction. Justice Wadhwa writes, "When the members of the Minorities Commission visited the village [within a fortnight of the supposed incidents], normalcy prevailed. Cases had already been registered against members of both the groups...." Justice Wadhwa shows that the Minorities Commission proceeded in a manner that is in manifest violation of its own statute. But the manufactured version of the Minorities Commission was used to fortify the pogrom-thesis.

Justice Wadhwa quotes the account that *The Economic Times* correspondent had filed after visiting the village. The 22 March, 1999, issue of the paper reported, Justice Wadhwa writes, "that roots of the Ranalai village incident in Gajapati district of Orissa in which houses of Christian families were burnt down by Hindu tribals of nearby villages lie in the economic disparities prevailing between the two communities. The report further said that tension had been

building up since the night of February 9, when 23 houses of Hindu families were burnt down by criminals belonging to the Christian community of the nearby Jhami Gaon.... The report further stated that 'The unfortunate incident was largely unreported and totally ignored by national and international media'."

In Dangs, Gujarat, newspapers reported not one but a set of attacks on churches. Accounts in our "national", that is English papers portrayed the attacks as the handiwork of militant Hindu organizations affiliated to the RSS. Reports in the papers of Gujarat pointed in an entirely different direction. The local Sarvodaya leaders – who have been working in the area for over forty years – put the responsibility at the door of missionaries and their aggressive proselytizing activities. In the English press, an organization styling itself as the Hindu Jagran Manch was held to have executed the attacks. The VHP said that the organization had nothing to do with it. *The Indian Express* showed that this organization had been listed in an RSS-brochure as one of its affiliates. The suspects were soon arrested. In the months that followed not one organization which had screamed about the "attacks" did anything to ensure that the trials of the suspects proceeded.

The contrast between the truth about the incidents and what they were made out to be should alert our newspapers and TV channels not to shoot off accounts without examining the facts. In particular, they must not go merely by the allegations of communalism-mongers.

Several groups have several reasons for manufacturing calumny – from money to ideology to the crassest kind of politics. Many of these are well-organized, some, as we shall see, have well-knit, world-wide networks. And they have honed expertise in manufacturing atrocity-stories, in broadcasting them round the globe, and in putting their manufactures to profitable use. One of the simplest of these techniques is to create an echo chamber. Select some out of

the way place. Manufacture an occurrence at this place: "Nun raped in Baripada." Get a wire service, one newspaper, or better still some TV channel to pick it up. Get your groups to broadcast it on Internet, over your publications, your radio network. By the time newspapers and channels get to send some reporter to reconstruct the incident, they would have carried the fabrication so many times that they would have to think first of the harm the facts would do to their own reputation. In the natural course, therefore, they would have a predisposition to reinforce the version they have been carrying.

And the condition of the media today makes it an easy instrument for spreading such fabrications: purveying allegations without any examination, servility to intellectual fashions, superciliousness.... each of these traits is familiar to readers, each of them has fateful consequences.

But media is just one of the institutions that contributes to broadcasting untruth in this fashion.

This is brought out by the fabrications which the Minorities Commission put out on the Ranalai incident. The ninth incident brings it out even more graphically. It was the one that resounded the world over like the rape of the four nuns – the brutal killing of an Australian missionary, Graham Staines and his two little sons.

The Staines killings

The murders of Graham Staines and his young sons were widely attributed to one, Dara Singh. Rival organizations alleged that he had been affiliated with the opposing organization: Hindu organizations alleged that he had been close to "progressive" politicians of UP, the latter alleged that he had been a member of the Bajrang Dal. The press in India and the world over portrayed the killings as part of the same series of assaults on Christians. The central Government appointed a Commission of Inquiry headed by a sitting judge

of the Supreme Court, Justice D.P. Wadhwa. The Judge submitted his report in July, 1999. Not one organization, not one publication which had done everything it could to portray the murders as the handiwork of raving Hindu fundamentalists so much as put out even *pro forma* a demand that the Government make public the Commission's findings!

The Government released the Report. On the face of it, the Report should have been very welcome to our secularist friends. Justice Wadhwa had concluded that the main person who organized the attack was indeed Rabindra Kumar Pal alias Dara Singh, that the killings were premeditated, that Dara Singh's motive in organizing and carrying through the brutal killings was "misplaced fundamentalism", namely his conviction that conversions by missionaries were threatening Hinduism. Justice Wadhwa also recorded evidence to the effect that Dara Singh had been involved in an activity which, in the eyes of secularists, is as nefarious as an activity can get: protection of cows from slaughter.

But no, the secularists were all in rage. "A stained report", "A whitewash", "A politically tutored report" – they shouted. Justice Wadhwa had failed the litmus test: if only he had included a sentence – a single sentence! – imputing, howsoever obliquely, that Dara Singh was in some way affiliated to some organization that our friends could have somehow linked to the RSS or the BJP, what applause would have greeted the Report!

But the Judge had stuck to evidence. Hence the fury! For our friends, a Commission of Inquiry is truthful only if it is useful! And it is useful only if it helps reinforce the stereotype they have manufactured!

The English press, as well as the Minorities Commission projected Staines as a devoted social worker. They focused on the work – exemplary work – he had been doing for leprosy patients. In the Report it sent to Justice Wadhwa, the Minorities Commission went so far as to declare that for ten years Staines and his family had not been involved

in preaching of Christianity leading to conversion in Manoharpur. That characterization is as good a point as any on which to begin.

In fact, associates of Staines himself told the Wadhwa Commission that Staines used to conduct "Bible classes" at "Jungle camps". One of his oldest acquaintances told the Commission that Staines had been totally secretive about both the "Jungle camps" and the accounts, etc., of the Leprosy House he ran. While some witnesses maintained that Staines never even attended baptisms, some reported that he did, and also that he provided vehicles for marriages and baptism functions. More telling is something of an order altogether different from the oral testimony of witnesses.

It turns out that Staines and his wife, Gladys, regularly filed despatches for a journal in Australia, *Tidings*. This journal is run by the missionary organization in Australia which financed Staines and his activities in Manoharpur. When the Commission learned about the despatches, it requested the concerned persons for copies of the journal. None were supplied! The Commission had to obtain these from other sources. Justice Wadhwa reproduces several extracts from the despatches.

> *Graham and Gladys Staines, Mayurbhanj, 25 April, 1997:* The first jungle camp in Ramchandrapur.was a fruitful time and the Spirit of God worked among the people. About 100 attended and some were baptized at the camp. At present Misayel and some of the Church leaders are touring a number of places where people are asking for baptism. Five were baptized at Bigonbadi. Pray for the Etani Trust in which the Mission properties are vested. One man managed by underhand means to get parts of the property in his own name and a number of nominal Christians of the Baripada Church are also trying to get some of this valuable property for themselves. The Trust is having to take legal action to rectify this.
>
> *Graham and Gladys Staines, Mayurbhanj, 23 July, 1997:* Praise God for answered prayer in the recent Jagannath car festival at Baripada. A good team of preachers came from the village churches

and four OM workers helped in the second part of the festival. There were record book sales, so a lot of literature has gone into the people's hand.... [Incidentally, OM is a carefully chosen acronym: the organization it signifies is actually one of the largest publishers and distributors of missionary literature, and has its offices in Carlisle, Cumbria, United Kingdom!]

Graham and Gladys Staines, Mayurbhanj, 19 September, 1997: Praise God we now have the Ho New Testament in Oriya script and many copies are now in the hands of the Ho people [Staines had done the translation himself]. Pray to God that it will be used of God to speak to many as they read his word in their own language....

Graham and Gladys Staines, Mayurbhanj, 11 February, 1998: Jungle camp means four days of Bible teaching, prayer and fellowship of Christians living together. It enables believers from other churches to meet with local Christians to discuss experiences and encourage one another.... The camp also can create hunger in the hearts of those who come just to observe. Each camp has a bookstall, which for many is the only chance to buy Christian literature.... It was also encouraging to see so many Ho people following the references in the Ho New Testament during the messages at Sarat Jungle camp. We sold all the New Testaments we took there....

Graham and Gladys Staines, Mayurbhanj, 20 March, 1998: ....Over the next two months there will be a programme of baptism in nearby villages for those asking for them. These are times for witness to non-Christians too....

Graham and Gladys Staines, Mayurbhanj, 19 May, 1998: There are many new believers in the Manoharpur Church and the work is growing. The devil is now finding opportunity to hinder the work of God. There is disagreement between the young people and the older men of the church. A problem arose about the land on which the church is built and the planned Vacation Bible School had to be canceled. Last year more than 100 children attended this programme. The translation of *Daily Life* into Oriya is complete....

Graham and Gladys Staines, Mayurbhanj, 19 June, 1998: In many churches here Sunday schools have ceased to function. I have been advocating these and at a recent church leaders meeting I heard that some have re-started this work.... The Vacation Bible School that was to be held at Manoharpur was canceled because of problems in the church there. Two hundred and eight children registered for the one

> at Raika.... It was an excellent time and some young people who teach in VBS [the Vacation Bible School] are being trained and encouraged for children's work and Sunday school.
>
> *Graham and Gladys Staines, Mayurbhanj, 21 August, 1998:* ....There are still divisions in the church at Manoharpur and the churches at Durakuntia and Burudi are very weak. It is wonderful to see the little girls being cared for in the Rairangpur hostel. They have a wonderful opportunity to learn to read and learn of the Lord....
>
> *Graham and Gladys Staines, Mayurbhanj, 18 September, 1998:* Four men visited Manoharpur Church to discuss the problems there and much was sorted out. A man who wants to be the head of the church wants to bring in or join with two other groups who do not teach and walk according to the scriptures....
>
> *Graham and Gladys Staines, Mayurbhanj, 19 December, 1998:* It is encouraging to hear of some improvement in the church at Manoharpur and that they are preparing for the jungle camp. Misayel, Paul and Nehemiah visited Patana in early December but, as many were away rice harvesting, they could meet only with a few. They were able to encourage a new believer who had been a priest of the Sana Dhoram, an animist sect. The village people pleaded with him not to become a Christian saying, 'How can we continue our worship if you leave us?' 'You can do as you like, but I am following Christ,' he said. Continue to pray. God is working.

The typical concerns of a typical missionary – harvesting souls for the Church, ensuring that properties of the church do not fall into hands of others, ensuring that control of church affairs remains in the hands of persons who will heed the missionary. The prejudices of a missionary – Sanatana Dharma, an animist sect! While his wife and some others denied this, one of his close associates spoke of his "hatred" for other religions. This associate reported – and even Gladys, Staines' wife, acknowledged – that, if he happened to be at any non-Christian function, Graham Staines would never take *prasad,* as, Mrs. Staines claimed, doing so is prohibited in the Bible....

After reviewing the evidence, the Wadhwa Commission, therefore, concludes,

> Besides his involvement with Leprosy House, Staines was also involved in missionary work. The missionary work of Staines has come to light from the various despatches sent by him to Australia, which are published in the newsletter, *'Tidings'*. Staines also used to take part in baptism ceremonies although he may not have necessarily carried out the baptism himself. Paul Murmu says that Staines attended baptism ceremonies and marriage ceremonies of Christian families whenever he was available. However, it is the despatches sent by Staines to Australia in the newsletter *'Tidings'* that make it clear that Staines was also involved in active propagation of his religion apart from his social work. It is also clear from the said despatches that conversions were taking place in jungle camps. The missionary work of Staines obviously included organizing and conducting jungle camps, translating the Bible in tribal languages, preaching of Bible to the tribals. It is obvious, therefore, that Staines was both a social worker engaged in the treatment and eradication of leprosy amongst the poorest of the poor and also a missionary driven by a deep commitment to his religion and the belief that he should spread its tenets amongst the people in the area. His missionary activities did lead to conversions of tribals to his faith.

But as far as the Minorities Commission is concerned, *suppresso veri,* and pronounce!

Having asserted that Graham Staines had not been involved in missionary work, the Minorities Commission asserted that cordial relations existed between Hindus and Christians, that there were no ill feelings among them. The two assertions together set the stage for the main theme which the Minorities Commission pressed: the murders were lightning out of the blue, they were the handiwork of Dara Singh, and Dara Singh in turn was affiliated to the Bajrang Dal.

While a number of Christian witnesses as well as some policemen told the Justice Wadhwa Commission that there was no communal tension in the area, others testified to the contrary. There had been tensions between the communities for seven years, they told the Commission. And for one reason.

The Australian missionary organization which was financing Staines had set up 20-25 churches in Mayurbhanj and Keonjhar districts, a linguist working with the Indian Evangelical Mission told the Commission. Jungle camps were used for baptizing persons, witnesses told the Commission. B. B. Panda, who was Director General of Police, Orissa from October, 1997 to March, 1999, stated in a report to the State Government that "Mr. Staines was attending Jungle Mela in Manoharpur for the last more than 20 years. Majority of the local Adivasi Christians had been converted to Christianity through his efforts." S.C. Bala, the Superintendent of Police of the Crime Branch, who investigated the case, was asked by the Wadhwa Commission what in his view was the likely motive for the murders. He told the Commission that the motive "appeared to be that non-Christian people were aggrieved on the ground that Christian fathers/missionaries are converting the people to Christianity in a deceitful manner by giving allurements."

More telling are the despatches of Staines and his wife in *Tidings*, the newsletter of the Australian missionary organization. They themselves wrote about these tensions repeatedly.

> *Graham and Gladys Staines, Mayurbhanj, 19 September, 1997:* ....The Ho believers in Thakurmunda still face persecution. From time to time the village people have beaten them up, broken their bicycles and not allowed them to worship in their own church building. Three people came to Baripada to meet district officials and petition for justice. Pray that action will be taken to allow freedom to worship.

> *Graham and Gladys Staines, Mayurbhanj, 22 February, 1998:* We have just arrived home from the Baliposi camp a day early. Some people from a Hindu militant group who are persecuting the Christians came to the camp but were not able to disturb the meetings. On the last day the police came and told us to stop the meeting and leave, as they would not be able to protect us.... [election-related requirements left no men to spare.]

> *Graham and Gladys Staines, Mayurbhanj, 20 March, 1998:* Six men came to Baripada to speak with officials in the intelligence department regarding the tension in the Thakurmunda area....
> *Graham and Gladys Staines, Mayurbhanj, 19 May, 1998:* ....We have been told that a militant Hindu group plans to concentrate on Mayurbhanj and Keonjhar districts to turn Christians back to Hinduism....

In a word: conversions were taking place; this had caused tensions; so much so that a Hindu group had decided to try and get the converts back into Hinduism. But for the Minorities Commission, all was peace and harmony!

The First Information Report on the Staines' murder was filed by the pastor of the Manoharpur Church. He turns out to be a good candidate for some of our secularist organizations. The assailants shouted *"Jai Bajrang Dal"*, he recorded in the FIR. Witness after Christian witness testified that what the assailants shouted was *"Jai Bajrang Bali"*. The assailants set fire to the church, he said. The church turned out to not have been harmed. On count after count – what he saw, what he heard, the persons he named as having committed the crime – the pastor's statements turned out to be contradictory. On count after count he disowned them himself. After narrating these somersaults, Justice Wadhwa remarks, "It is, thus, clear that the FIR was drawn up only after the Chief Minister had left Manoharpur. From all angles, it is a doctored FIR, a large part of which has been disowned by the informant himself and also has been shown to be false." But it is this FIR which became the basis for imaginative journalism.

B.B. Panda, who was then Director General of Police, Orissa, told the Commission that the *New Indian Express* – that is, the southern editions of the *Indian Express* – of 25 January, 1999, quoted him as saying, "Over 50 people suspected to be activists of the Bajrang Dal and Vishwa Hindu Parishad were involved in the incident, and so far 47 persons have been arrested." He told the Commission that, as he had

not said this, he sent the paper a contradiction. The paper did not publish the contradiction.

By that figure of 47-50 arrests hangs another lesson also.

One result of the gruesome nature of the murders, of the fact that even the little sons had been done to death, of the fact that the State Government had to show to the Congress leadership in Delhi that it was acting energetically, and also of the glare the media had brought to bear on the case was that the police felt it just had to show *something*. The consequence? "The police went berserk," observes Justice Waḍhwa. It picked up anyone who in its imagination could somehow or the other be linked with the Bajrang Dal. Fifty one persons were thrown into jail. The Crime Branch found that there was absolutely no case against them. All of them had to be released. Justice Wadhwa observes,

> It would thus appear that 51 persons underwent the agony of going into judicial custody for two months or more. Though initially the State Government took a great deal of pride that police arrested as many as 51 accused showing the efficiency and promptness of the police, but ultimately subsequent events showed that in the State of Orissa, as far as these 51 persons are concerned, there was no rule of law. Prakash Mehra (DIG) in his supervision note had stated that there was no evidence in respect of all the five FIR-named accused persons or the 51 persons arrested by the local police.

"The question then arises in view of the contradictions which make the FIR a false document, what was the motivating force behind it?," asks Justice Wadhwa. "And why as many as 51 innocent persons were arrested between 23rd to 28th January, 1999?" "Answers to these questions are not far to seek," he concludes. "The State Government was rattled by the gravity of the crime. To divert attention from its own failure to maintain law and order and to protect the innocent and then show 'speedy and decisive' action, a false picture is presented."

And as for the involvement of the Bajrang Dal, etc., the

Commission concludes, "The Commission has scrutinized the evidence before it and especially the evidence of the associates of Dara Singh who were involved in the carnage at Manoharpur. There is no evidence to suggest that any of the persons involved in the crime was in fact a member of either the Bajrang Dal or BJP or any organization. There is nothing to suggest in the evidence before the Commission, or in the investigation conducted by the Crime Branch and the CBI thus far that there is involvement of any organization, even that of Bajrang Dal, in the planning and the execution of the crime."

Several witnesses testified to Dara Singh's involvement in the crime – in preparing for it, in executing it. Justice Wadhwa is in no doubt that Dara Singh was the prime mover. To fly off in rage at Dara Singh, and feel that one has done one's duty is to miss the point.

There are several important clues. Several witnesses testified that Dara Singh had been engaged in rescuing cows that were being transported for slaughter. He had been trying to get the State to enforce laws which it has itself enacted for preventing cruelty to animals. This activity was branded, even by the police, to be "anti-Muslim" activity. Dara Singh was accordingly implicated in cases filed by persons engaged in transporting and selling cows for slaughter. That is as far as the consequences for Dara Singh under the law are concerned. The effect on the people was the exact opposite. Witness-29, who testified that he had been asked by Dara Singh to accompany him to Manoharpur, told the Commission, "Dara Singh is a very popular figure in the village as he forcibly frees cows from the people who take them for selling. After freeing the cows, Dara Singh distributes the cows among the villagers...."

Cows are revered by Hindus. The man trying to save them becomes an outlaw in the eyes of the police, and a hero in the eyes of the people. Two lessons in that.

On the other hand, Staines and his associates are left free to

go on converting Hindus to Christianity. Tensions mount as a result. Staines' own despatches testify to this. But our institutions – the Minorities Commission and the police being representative in this regard – even in retrospect assert the fiction that there was no tension between Christians and non-Christians.

The second clue is provided by the evidence of a key witness, one whose testimony contributes most to the concluding that Dara Singh was the architect of the crime. The witness is one Dipu Das. He was a close associate of Dara Singh. He revealed to the Commission that "youth from Gayalmunda and Bhalughera had approached Dara Singh sometime in August 1998 to stop the Christians from converting Hindus to Christianity...."

A clue for us to follow.

3

Body counts: big, and compelling business

The central premise of the Church, thus, remains that only those will be saved who confess to faith in Christ. More than that has been the institutional impulse. The Church had but to get established and it became obsessed with numbers – with the number of souls it had, to use the term so favoured by churchmen, "harvested" for Jesus. Numbers remain its singular obsession today: we will see this soon in the case of Mother Teresa herself – we will soon see how intensely the hierarchy will use her for marketing purposes should the Church see its way to proclaiming her a saint.

The impulse is not just the Church's own history in this regard. The impulse is not just its character – it is, after all, primarily an organization, and therefore like all organizations it is obsessed with its market-share.

To a very large extent, the impulse is commercial. The Church is big business. Evangelization is big business. And this business depends on that "harvesting" of souls. You just have to scan American missionary publications, or those of Europe, to see that one of the main grounds on which believers are induced to donate funds to the Church is that the money is needed for harvesting work. But even in that there is now a problem.

In Europe as well as in the USA, the Church is in serious trouble. Attendance in Rome itself has fallen to just three per cent of the number of nominal believers – in Rome, the very seat of the Vatican. With this shrivelling, has come another problem: the Church has been having greater and greater

difficulties in recruiting priests, nuns, and ancillary staff to man the churches. The need for focusing on countries such as India has therefore tripled.

Missionary publications bear ample testimony to this focus: they are full of targets, of detailed plans, of marketing strategies by which the harvest here is to be multiplied: a church to be "planted" in every village, a Bible to be placed in every pair of hands, lists and characteristics of "people-groups" which are to be targeted – women, Scheduled Castes, and, most of all, tribals; the beliefs and characteristics of each target-group which can be used to enter the group, the beliefs which are liable to be hindrances and how these may be transformed into aids.

"The majority Meiti are Hindu," notes *Operation World*, and points to what may be used to wean them away: "nationalism is lowering commitment to Hinduism." As a rule, evangelists denounce nationalism, how are they looking hopefully at nationalism among the Meiti?, you may wonder – that is because, in this instance, by "nationalism" they mean feeling for the tribal identity as against what the people of the region share with the rest of the country! Meghalaya: already 57 per cent Christian, focus has now to be on "the less reached" – "Some of the smaller tribes – notably the Hajong, Mikir and others – have been less responsive and remain entrenched in their animism. The Hindu minority has been little affected by the gospel." Mizoram: already 85 per cent Christian; focus has to be on "the less reached" – and there is a sign of hope, "The Buddhist Chakmas are being intensively evangelized by Mizo, and churches are multiplying," followed by the next target-group in bold type, "The Bangladeshi refugees and the Hindu population are needy." The beam of hope from Nagaland: "Missionary vision blossomed as a result of revival. Christians made a solemn covenant in 1980 to live for, and further, world evangelization. They are trusting God that 10,000 missionaries will be sent from Nagaland...."

Not just the minute targeting, notice the words they use, the very ones who denounce Hinduism for being saturated with casteism. "Haryana is one of India's least evangelized states," *Operation World* laments. "Indian agencies are pioneering work among the eight million Jat and 1.5 million *Chamar* castes (FMPB, Indian Inland Mission), and the Sikhs (Indian Inland Mission). Pray for a response. Pray also for the unreached Muslims and Jains...." "Punjab...., Most of the Christian community originated in the last century in mass movements from depressed *Chamar* and *Chura* castes...." *"Chamar," "Chura"* – were some Hindu publication or even a Government publication to use such words, they would shout, "degrading, insulting, obnoxious, totally unacceptable, a penal offence...."

A minor footnote: *Operation World* is published by the same *Om Publishing,* Carlisle, UK, that we encountered in the Staines' despatches! [Patrick Johnstone, *Operation World,* OM Publishing, Carlisle, UK, 1993. The map of the country with which the chapter on India opens shows not just most of Kashmir to be out of India, it shows Arunachal Pradesh also as being in some other country.]

That name – OM – tells a larger tale. Missionary publications set out how the dress of the clergy, how the ambiance in churches, how Christian ritual are to be "indigenised" so that people do not continue to look upon the Church as foreign. Stating that the Cardinal President of the Consilium, His Eminence Benno Cardinal Gut, has accepted the proposals of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India, a circular of Archbishop D. Simon Lourdusamy informed churches in the country,

> (1) The posture during Mass, both for priests and the faithful may be adapted to local usage, that is sitting on the floor, standing and the like; footwear may also be removed. (2) Genuflections may be replaced by the profound bow with the *anjali hasta*. (3) A *panchanga pranam* by both priests and faithful can take place before the liturgy of the Word, as part of the Penitential rite, and at the

conclusion of the Anaphora. (4) Kissing of objects may be adapted to local customs, that is touching the object with one's fingers or palm of one's hand and bringing the hands to one's eyes or forehead. (5) The kiss of peace could be given by the exchange of *anjali hasta* and/or the placing of the hands of the giver between the hands of the recipient. (6) Incense could be made use of in liturgical services. The receptacle could be the simple incense bowl with handle. (7) The vestments could be simplified. A single tunic-type chasuble with a stole (*angavastra*) could replace the traditional vestments of the Roman rite.... (8) The corporal could be replaced by a tray (*thali* or *thamboola thattu*).... (9) Oil lamps could be used instead of candles. (10) The preparatory rite of the Mass may include: ....(b) the welcome of the celebrant in the Indian way, e.g. with a single *arati*, washing of hands etc.; (c) lighting of the lamp.... (12) In the Offertory rite and at the conclusion of the Anaphora the Indian form of worship may be integrated, that is, double or triple *arati* of flowers, and/or incense, and/or light....

An evangelical Internet site exults in how that ministry consciously avoids overturning the beliefs and practices of the target-peoples, how instead it ensures "deculturisation" over an extended period by introducing into their awareness what it terms "functional substitutes" for those beliefs and practices. So much so that it commends its own logo too on this ground! We have not replaced the lotus, "which is supposed to be the seat of the Indian gods," it reports, we have entrenched the Cross in it! While addressing the ignorant and illiterate in India this ministry will point to the lotus, while addressing the potential donor its selling-point is the opposite: "The inference is," the site informs that donor, "that the historical Christ and the Cross must ultimately take the seat of these mythological deities and thereby Christianity should become deeply rooted in the culture of India."

Even minor outfits garner literally millions through this harvesting business. Taken as a whole the enterprise is being conducted on a scale we just cannot imagine. As the late Ram Swarup had pointed out, even fifteen years ago, the *Mission Handbook, North American Ministries Overseas* had put the

number of missionaries raking in the harvest at around *a quarter million*. Even then it had put the expenditure on such activity at around *one and a half billion dollars*. Of course, it had exhorted the faithful to dole out much more: "it costs money to stay in business," it had said with fetching frankness ! One of the ways for these missionaries to get their flock to cough up money has been to paint our people and country in gory colours – this has not changed one bit since the 19th century. Starving, sunk in superstition, crushed under the heels of high-caste Hindus, in the grip of Satan himself – hence the urgent duty to save them, and for that send your donation to.... "The Indian sub-continent, with one billion people, is a living example of what happens when Satan rules the entire culture," Ram Swarup quoted from the Texas-based *Gospel for Asia*. "India is one vast purgatory in which millions of people.... are literally living a cosmic lie. Could Satan have devised a more perfect system for causing misery?"

Nothing gets the faithful to dip into their pockets as atrocity stories. The country got a taste, as we have seen, in late 1998-early 1999 of the extent of the Church's networks, of their potency, as well as of the shameless vigour with which they deploy falsehood. Every other week it was jolted by stories of atrocities being heaped on poor Christians by rabid Hindu fundamentalists. They were a substantial plot in themselves. But in fact the fabrications are just a part – just one component of a general device, an enormously lucrative device at that.

Atrocity stories

Missionary publications and Internet sites are predictably full of gory tales, and, unlike those eight incidents which have disappeared from our papers, the regular Christian publications and sites are full of atrocity-mongering at all times.

"Christian suffering in India is the worst in India in 50

years," a site informed potential donors through the Internet in a dispatch by the Editors of *Religion Today,* dated 30 November, 1998 – that is, even before the late 1998-early 1999 series of fabrications began to be put out. "Mobs of religious fanatics have attacked churches and Christian schools, dispersed outdoor gospel meetings, and beaten evangelists in dozens of incidents this year," it proclaimed. "Oppression is widespread," it said, sourcing it to "a person with contacts." Churches have been burned, an orthodox school attacked for not teaching Sanskrit, tractors and crowbars used in attack.... Government deliberately taking no action.... Hence "the workers pray God for their protection. They 'take the threats before the Lord in fasting prayer and ask Him to protect them.' Christians have been beaten, tortured with razor blades, and thrown from a speeding train, and 6 to 12 per year are martyred, he said."

Who said? The very same propagandist-Editor who was soon to be in the forefront spreading concoctions like "Jhabua re-enacted in Jhajjar."

But not just atrocity stories – if they were all, they could well drain potential donors of enthusiasm, "What's the use?", they could conclude. And so, triumph-in-face-of-atrocity, atrocity-as a-reflection-of-triumph stories too. The same site, in the same story, "....Hundreds of tribal people in a section of northern India are becoming Christians through the efforts of evangelists" – notice the unverifiable locale: "a section of northern India"! Next, "The area is known for violent tribal clashes" – that to redouble the admiration for the evangelists: they are doing the Lord's work in spite of the risks the area poses. "'It is the greatest revival we know of at this time,' he said. 'You don't get this kind of revival without persecution, and bloodshed, and martyrdom. One comes with the other.'"

The one operational conclusion!

Conclusion: *give* because India is in the grip of Satan; *give* because with its billion people India represents such a vast

opportunity to save souls for the Lord; *give* because Christians are being cut up with razor blades there; *give* because in spite of this, in fact *because* of this bloodshed, the harvest is multiplying by the hour.... And as in every advertising campaign, a certificate from a satisfied consumer! "Dr. Donald McGavran made the following observation about the ECI [the Evangelical Church of India]," notes a related site on Internet. "'The fascinating story of the unique church planting ministry of ECI in India must be told everywhere in the pessimistic missionary world. What Dr. Sargunam and his colleagues have achieved during the last two decades affirms that the Lord of the harvest is at work in several parts of India. I have been in a few of these churches and watched the number of baptisms. I commend Christians everywhere to support and claim a share in this tremendous victory and help many more thousands to be discipled and churches multiplied until Christ returns.'"

The site of *AD 2000 Mission* informs donors, "Vasanthraj Albert of the Church Growth Research Center in Madras, states, 'I believe that India today is on the map for the global church.' And Peter Wagner, coordinator for the *AD 2000 United Prayer Mobilization Network* observes, 'Of all the nations in the world, India has the highest potential of fruitful investment of evangelistic effort at this time. It is the place to invest time, energy and resources.'"

Organizations upon organizations. Targets upon targets: for "200 people-groups", for "50 languages", for "50 urban areas", for "200 geographical districts". How their mouths water at the sight of "unreached peoples": "Remarkably this [the unreached of India] is 30% of the world's unreached peoples. The goal is to plant churches in all the remaining 500,000 villages and several thousand unevangelised segments of the 300 largest cities in India. To achieve these goals, delegates have agreed to cooperate with the *India Mission Association*, which networks to place an evangelist in every postal code area."

"Calcutta is an amazing testimony to the power of prayer,"

the site of the *AD2000* movement reports. An estimated 35 million focused on Calcutta one day, it says. This was followed by a month of on-site prayer. "That month of prayer enhanced the *Mission Calcutta 2000 Network*, whose aim is to establish a church in every one of the city's 93 postal zones by the end of the year 2000. Great progress has been made. Thirty zones that did not have a church now have one. Today only 30 other zones remain untouched."

And Calcutta isn't the only target, it says. "Varanasi in the state of Uttar Pradesh is Hinduism's holiest city, with thousands of temples centering on the worship of Shiva, an idol whose symbol is the phallus. Many consider this city the very seat of Satan. Hindus believe that bathing in the Ganges at Varanasi washes away all sins. A number of Christian workers took up the burden of prayer for this city and in prayer-walks boldly declared before the idols, 'You are not a living god.' One year later it was discovered that church planting works had opened up in sixty villages around Varanasi over that past year, with 300 baptisms reported." "An intensive training program has been implemented to teach people to practice intercession for the target units," it records. "An experienced prayer warrior from Africa, Dr. Zachariah Fomum, has played a key role in this training for prayer.... India is ready and waiting."

One of the difficulties has been that India is "like an intricate mosaic," the site says. At last the barrier is being breached. "Much progress has been made in the last few years to 'spy out the land and its inhabitants' and to give an accurate and up-to-date picture of the challenges and the opportunities," it reports. "*The Indian Missions Association*, in partnership with *Gospel for Asia*, has researched and published very informative and accurate books on what has been done so far and the work yet to be done to complete the task of evangelization within India. They have defined the work according to language groups, PIN (Zip) codes, and unreached-people groups in the country...." The work of

others is contributing to the same cause, the site informs the faithful – hence, the Anthropological Survey of India is completing and publishing its "People of India Project". Invaluably helpful data....

And that too testifies to God's hidden plan! "Perhaps never before has this kind of information on India been so carefully surveyed, prepared, well-published and distributed. In this the North India-Hindi Belt is unique. We do not believe it is accidental. God is allowing us to 'spy out the land' that we might go in and claim both it and its inhabitants for Him."

"But who are these organizations? Who are these individuals?," asked a member of the Congress(I) in a raised voice. I had just drawn the attention of the Rajya Sabha to what these publications were themselves proclaiming. The organizations and individuals are active in India, they are the cause of much tension. Their activities and statements had been in newspapers all over. But our MP was all fire and fury. Who are they?, he demanded.

4

Is the Vatican also unknown?

The right of the Church, the divinely ordained duty of the Church, the very purpose of the Church is to proclaim the Gospel to all men, to ensure that all things and all men "are restored in Christ." That claim, or objective if you like, is reiterated at every turn by the Church – it was advanced emphatically by Vatican-II in several of its decrees: in *Lumen Gentium,* the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church,* in *Ad Gentes,* its *Decree on the Mission Activity of the Church,* and others.

While the message has been taken to and received by millions, millions remain out of its reach as yet, Vatican-II noted. Many of them have not received it through no fault of their own. "Hence, to procure the glory of God and the salvation of all these, the Church, mindful of the Lord's command, 'preach the Gospel to every creature' (*Mark* 16:16) takes zealous care to foster the missions."

Doing so is our right, it is our over-riding duty, Vatican-II declared:

> As he had been sent by the Father, the Son himself sent the apostles (cf. *John* 20:21) saying, 'go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and behold I am with you all days even unto the consummation of the world' (*Matthew* 28:18-20). The Church has received this solemn command of Christ from the apostles, and she must fulfill it to the very ends of the earth (cf. *Acts* 1:8). Therefore, she makes the words of the apostle her own, 'Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel' (1*Cor.* 9:16), and accordingly never ceases to send heralds of the Gospel until each time the infant churches are

> fully established, and can themselves continue the work of evangelization. For the Church is driven by the Holy Spirit to do her part for the full realization of the plan of God, who has constituted Christ as the source of salvation for the whole world. By her proclamation of the Gospel, she draws her hearers to receive and profess the faith, she prepares them for baptism, snatches them from the slavery of error, and she incorporates them into Christ so that in love for him they grow to full maturity. The effect of her work is that whatever good is found sown in the minds and hearts of men or in the rites and customs of peoples, these not only are preserved from destruction, but are purified, raised up, and perfected for the glory of God, the confusion of the devil, and the happiness of man.[1]

A duty handed on through Jesus from God Himself. Compelled by the example of Jesus himself. In obedience to the command of Jesus himself. That is how the Church puts its goal of conversion beyond reasoning and argument. That is how it seeks to put its claim to pursue conversion beyond the reach of law and Constitutional provisions, of judgments of courts. And notice too the condescension hidden beneath all the fine talk of God, broad-mindedness: what is to be preserved, what in fact is preserved from other traditions and religious systems?; "whatever is good" in them; and what is the "good in them"?; that which conforms to, that which has traces of the Christian dogma!

The same string of assertions follow one after the other in *Ad Gentes,* Vatican-II's *Decree on the Mission Activity of the Church*. "Divinely sent to the nations of the world to be unto them 'a universal sacrament of salvation', the Church, driven by inner necessity of her own catholicity, and obeying the mandate of her Founder (cf. *Mark* 16:16), strives ever to proclaim the Gospel to all men," the *Decree* begins – thus the Church is to pursue this purpose because it has been "divinely sent", because it is "driven by inner necessity," because that is the mandate its Founder decreed for it. "The

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[1]*Lumen Gentium,* the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church,* 21 November, 1964, 17.

Apostles themselves, on whom the Church was founded, following in the footsteps of Christ, 'preached the word of God and begot churches,'" the *Decree* continues. "It is the duty of their successors to make this task endure 'so that the word of God may run and be glorified' (*2 Thess.* 3:1) and the kingdom of God be proclaimed and established throughout the world."

Indeed, given the way things are, the duty is all the more urgent, the Council said: "In the present state of affairs, out of which there is arising a new situation for mankind, the Church, being the salt of the earth and the light of the world (cf. *Matthew* 5:13-14), is more urgently called upon to renew every creature, that all things may be restored in Christ and all men may constitute one family in Him and one people of God." In plain language, all persons and all things belong to Christ, that what is being done is merely to "restore" them to Him – exactly the claim on which conversion is undertaken, and lands have been usurped down the centuries for Islam! And the justification for this mission is that the Church is "the salt of the earth and the light of the world," that it is the "universal sacrament of salvation." And what is the basis for this claim? That *Matthew* says so, that it has been so proclaimed by the same Council, Vatican-II, in another Decree, *Lumen Gentium,* 48![2] No more than a self-anointing though it is, in the reckoning of the Church the claim entitles, indeed binds the Church to bring "all men" and "all things" under its wing!

"Therefore", said the Council – *"Therefore"?,* how does self-acclamation *prove* the proposition? – "this sacred synod, while rendering thanks to God for the excellent results that have been achieved through the whole Church's great-hearted endeavour, desires to sketch the principles of missionary activity and to rally the forces *of all the faithful* in order that the people of God, marching along the narrow way

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[2]See note 1 of *Ad Gentes.*

of the Cross, *may spread everywhere the reign of Christ,* Lord and overseer of the ages (cf. *Ecc.* 36:19), and may prepare the way for His coming."[3]

The Council proclaimed "without hesitation", as it noted, "that what has not been taken up by Christ is not made whole."[4] Indeed, not only is the Church conducting its missionary activity because of its love and compassion for mankind – love and compassion which impel it to save each and every human being – it is God Himself who is acting through the Church, the Council claimed. "Missionary activity is nothing else and nothing less than an epiphany, or a manifesting of God's decree," Vatican-II maintained, "and its fulfillment in the world and in world history, in the course of which God, by means of mission, manifestly works out the history of salvation. By the preaching of the word and by the celebration of the sacraments, the center and summit of which is the most holy Eucharist, He brings about the presence of Christ, the author of salvation. But whatever truth and grace are to be found among the nations, as a sort of secret presence of God, He frees from all taint of evil and restores to Christ its maker, who overthrows the devil's domain and wards off the manifold malice of vice. And so, whatever good is found to be sown in the hearts and minds of men, or in the rites and cultures peculiar to various peoples" – this condescension is what constitutes the new "tolerance" for which we are to be properly grateful – "is not only not lost, but is healed, uplifted and perfected for the glory of God, the shame of the demon, and the bliss of men" – in actual fact, having "harvested" the man and his family, the missionaries strain to have them do things that rent asunder every link with their tradition and culture, but in their reckoning they are just healing, uplifting and perfecting our sick, fallen and flawed cultures.

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[3] *Ad Gentes, Decree on the Mission Activity of the Church,* 7 December, 1965, 1. In this book, unless otherwise stated, emphases have been added.

[4] *Ibid.,* 3.

The Council proceeded to remark, "Thus, missionary activity tends toward eschatological fullness. For by it the people of God is increased to that measure and time which the Father has fixed in His power (cf. *Acts* 1:7). To this people it was said in prophecy: *'Enlarge the space for your tent, and spread out your tent cloths unsparingly'* (*Is.* 54:2). By missionary activity the mystical body grows to the mature measure of the fullness of Christ (cf. *Eph.* 4:13); and the spiritual temple, where God is adored in spirit and in truth (cf. *John* 4:23), grows and is built up upon the foundation of the Apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the supreme corner stone (*Eph.* 2:20)."[5]

The Church has been sent by Christ to communicate "the love of God" "to all men and nations," the Council said. It is acutely aware, the Council said, that the Gospel message "has not yet, or hardly yet, been heard by two billion human beings (and their number is increasing daily), who are formed into large and distinct groups by permanent cultural ties, by ancient religious traditions, and by firm bonds of social necessity. Some of these men are followers of one of the great religions, but others remain strangers to the very knowledge of God, while still others expressly deny His existence, and sometimes even attack it. The Church, in order to offer all of them the mystery of salvation and the life brought by God, *must implant herself into these groups* for the same motive which led Christ to bind Himself, in virtue of His incarnation, to certain social and cultural conditions of those human beings among whom He dwelt."[6] "Sent by Christ", "for the same motive as Christ" – these are assertions, self-certificates. The operational part is, *"the Church.... must plant herself into these groups."*

The Council urged missionary organizations to adopt techniques, etc., which would make them more efficient in

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[5]*Ibid.*, 9.
[6]*Ibid.*, 10.

their task: training, organizational proficiency, setting up institutions of service, research, and the rest. Not the least among these is for the missionary to immerse himself in the beliefs and practices of the target groups. As the Council stressed, "All these different kinds of formations should be completed in the lands to which they are sent, so that the missionaries may have a more thorough knowledge of the history, social structures, and the customs of the people; that they may have an insight into their moral order and their religious precepts, and into the secret notions which, according to their sacred tradition, they have formed concerning God, the world and man. Let the missionaries learn the languages to such a degree that they can use them in a fluent and polished manner, and so find more easy access to the minds and the hearts of men. Furthermore, they should be properly introduced into special pastoral problems...."[7]

Nor is missionary activity to be the concern only of those who hold office in the hierarchy of the Church: every lay devotee must contribute his mite. This point was stressed more than once by Vatican-II in *Lumen Gentium*. After listing the "reasons" – the command of God, the command and example of Jesus, etc. – on account of which it is compelled to evangelise, the pronouncement decrees, *"Each disciple of Christ has the obligation of spreading the faith to the best of his ability...."* [8] And again, later in the same decree, "....That is, the faithful who by baptism are incorporated in Christ, are placed in the People of God, and in their own way *share the priestly, prophetic and kingly office of Christ, and to the best of their ability carry on the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and the world."*[9] And yet again,

> The apostolate of the laity is a sharing in the salvific mission of the Church. Through Baptism and Confirmation all are appointed to this apostolate by the Lord himself. Moreover, by the sacraments, and

[7] *Ibid.*, 26. [8] *Lumen Gentium, op. cit.*, 17.
[9] *Ibid.*, 31.

> especially by the Eucharist, that love of God and man which is the soul of the apostolate is communicated and encouraged. The laity, however, are given this special vocation: *to make the Church present and fruitful in those places and circumstances where it is only through them that she can become the salt of the earth. Thus, every lay person, through those gifts given to him, is at once the witness and the living instrument of the mission of the Church itself 'according to the measure of Christ's bestowal.'*[10]

"Besides this apostolate which belongs to absolutely every Christian," the Council continued, "the laity can be called in different ways to more immediate cooperation in the apostate of the hierarchy, like those men and women who helped the apostle Paul in the Gospel, labouring much in the Lord (cf. *Phil.* 4-3; *Rom.* 16:3 ff.)...." – in plain words, they can be directed to assist the missionaries and priests in more direct ways to further their work of "planting" churches and the like. *"All the laity, then, have the exalted duty of working for the ever greater spread of the divine plan of salvation to all men, of every epoch and all over the earth.* Therefore may the way be clear for them to share diligently in the salvific work of the Church according to their ability and the needs of the times."[11]

And yet again:

> ....Therefore, even when occupied by temporal affairs, the laity can, and must, do valuable work for the evangelization of the world. But when there are no sacred ministers or when these are impeded under persecution, some lay people supply sacred functions to the best of their ability, or if, indeed, many of them expend all their energies in apostolic work, nevertheless the whole laity must cooperate in spreading and in building up the kingdom of Christ....[12]

The same goal that we encountered in the proclamations of

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[10] *Lumen Gentium, op. cit.*, 33. [11] *Ibid.*, 33.
[12] *Ibid.*, 35.

organizations which the irate Congress(I) MP refused to recognise. The same goal, advanced on the same grounds. Is the Vatican also to be dismissed as some unknown organization?

5

Their singular objective *vs.* the law of the land

At every turn, decrees and other proclamations of the Church recall what they characterize as "the final command" of Jesus, "All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you...."[1] Citing this, the Church claims as do individual missionaries that it isn't just their right, it is their overriding duty to preach, and not just to preach but to baptize and convert.

And to go on converting till all everywhere are converted to Christianity. "From the beginning", the Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes stated in a typical passage, "the tradition of the Church – is it perhaps necessary to recall it? – presents us with this privileged witness of a constant seeking for God, of *an undivided love for Christ alone*, and for *an absolute dedication to the growth of his kingdom....*"[2]

The goal was affirmed even more emphatically in *Evangelii nuntiandi,* the proclamation on "Evangelization in the Modern World." The preaching of the Gospel is a duty, the Pope declared, which shall benefit not only Christians but

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[1]*Matthew,* 28.18-20.

[2]*Evangelica testificatio,* the *Apostolic Exhortation on the Renewal of Religious Life,* 29 June, 1971, 3.

the whole human race.[3] It is a duty that falls not just on those who are formally in the hierarchy of the Church, it is the duty which every Christian must discharge, the proclamation emphasized: "The command which was given to the twelve: 'Go preach the Gospel' applies to *all* Christians though in different ways. This is why Peter calls them a 'chosen race – to declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light'...." "Moreover, the Gospel of the kingdom which is coming and has already begun," the Pope continued, "*concerns all men of all times. All those, therefore, who have received this message and by virtue of it have been united in the community of salvation have the power and the obligation to hand it on and disseminate it.*" "The Church is keenly aware of this," he said, "she realizes that the words of the Saviour: 'I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God' have a direct application to herself. And with St. Paul she freely declares: 'If I preach the Gospel, that gives me no cause for boasting. *For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel.*'" It was therefore "a great joy and consolation" for him, the Pope said, to hear the Assembly of Bishops declare, "We wish to affirm once again that *the essential mission of the Church is to evangelise all men.*"[4]

On the fact that it is in the Gospel that the true path to salvation lies, on the fact that spreading the message of Christ is a duty inherent in the Church, that it is a necessity for the Church, on that there can be no compromise, the Pope emphasized. Proclamations about ecumenism are made much of in Church propaganda in countries such as India. What they amount to is well brought out by the emphatic declaration of the Roman Pontiff in this regard:

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[3]Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi,* the proclamation on *Evangelization in the Modern World,* 8 December, 1975, 1.

[4]*Ibid.*, 13, 14.

> ....The Gospel message is, therefore, necessary; it is unique; it is irreplaceable. *It does not admit of any indifference, of any accommodation to the principles of other religious beliefs or of any compromise,* for on it depends the whole issue of man's salvation and in it are contained all the splendours of divine revelation....[5]

The lofty reasons that are adduced – "for on it depends the whole issue of man's salvation and in it are contained all the splendours of divine revelation" – are just presumption. The point is the operational inference which is drawn from the supposition: *"It does not admit of any indifference, of any accommodation to the principles of other religious beliefs or of any compromise."*

And for good reason: "The Gospel which has been entrusted to us is also the word of truth," the proclamation declares, "This truth confers liberty on men and *it is it alone which can bring peace to the soul....*"[6] In a word, the Church loves mankind, it fervently desires the salvation of everyone; therefore, in *their* interest, the Church cannot keep itself from persuading them of the truth of the one doctrine which alone can bring them salvation.

The slight nod towards other paths which Vatican-II had made has remained just that, a formal nod, in a sense just words. These other religions contain "seeds of the Word," the Church continues to maintain – while it, of course, is the repository of the Word in its fullness! Each of these other religions is but a "preparation for the Gospel," it says.[7] True, other religions contain "seeds of the Word," true, they are "preparations for the Gospel." But unless those who still stick to them realize that these religions are but "seeds", that they are but a "preparation", hence incomplete and imperfect, unless, that is, the adherents grow out of these religions and

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[5] *Ibid.*, 5. [6] *Ibid.*, 78. [7] *Ibid.*, 53.

embrace Christianity, they are doomed to perdition, the Church declares again and again:

> ....Those who have responded to the love and compassion of God will go to eternal life. Those who have refused them to the end will be consigned to the fire that is never extinguished....;[8] ....Certainly, *the only complete salvation offered to men is Christ himself, the Son of God and the Son of Man,* who makes himself present in history through the Church. He joins inseparably together love for God and the love which God has until the end for men as they seek their way amid the shadows, and the value of human love whereby a man gives his life for his friends. *In Christ, and only in him,* do all these things become whole....[9]

The operational inference which is invariably drawn from that formal nod – about other traditions containing the seed also – further belittle the concession. "Neither the respect for these religions," the Church declares, "nor the high esteem in which we hold them nor the complexity of the questions involved should deter the Church from proclaiming the message of Jesus Christ to these non-Christians. On the contrary she holds that these multitudes of men have the right to know the mystery of Christ...." Thus, the Church is labouring hard – just to fulfill the right of non-Christians! And for good reason, as always: "....in other words, by virtue of our religion," the Church declares, "a true and living relationship with God is established *which other religions cannot achieve* even though they seem, as it were, to have their arms raised up towards heaven." Condescension can scarcely be greater! Even their hands being raised towards heaven is something "as it were"!

The operational imperative is predictable: "The Church *therefore* [It is indeed one of these enduring mysteries how

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[8]Pope Paul VI, *Solemni hac liturgia, The Credo of the People of God,* 30 June, 1968.

[9]Synod of Bishops, *Ultimis temporibus, The Ministerial Priesthood.* 30 November, 1967, 6.

from a series of suppositions and assertions the Church jumps unabashedly to *"therefore"*!] seeks to foster and maintain her missionary zeal: it is, in fact, her aim to increase it in these present times. She feels bound by a duty to all peoples in the discharge of which she will spare no pains in her efforts to spread the good news of Jesus our Saviour" – hence the Church is sending out missionaries to ensure that the rights of the non-Christians are fulfilled! It is doing so because it is in duty bound to serve these suffering non-Christians! Accordingly, "She is constantly training new generations of missionaries for this purpose...."[10]

We are being constantly told in India that Christianity has turned a new leaf. See, Vatican-II went so far as to acknowledge that salvation is possible through other routes also. What more can be expected? The Church on the other hand has since been emphasizing that that kind of acknowledgment does not curtail the right and duty of the Church to bring home the truth of the Gospel to all mankind. The proclamation on Evangelization lists inferences which are drawn from those passages in Vatican-II documents – only to dismiss them: "So it is that only too often do we hear it asserted in various forms that to insist on a truth, even if it be a truth of the Gospel, to prescribe a way of life, even if it be the way of salvation, is to do violence to religious liberty. And, they will add, why should the Gospel be preached if all men can attain salvation by their own uprightness of heart? Furthermore, they say, the world and its history are full of the 'seeds of the word'; it is therefore a mere illusion to seek to bring the Gospel to places where it is already present in the seeds which the Lord himself has sown."

Such views are "entirely different" from the view which inheres in the Vatican-II documents, the Church warns. "So

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[10]Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi*, the proclamation on *Evangelization in the Modern World*, *op. cit.*, 53.

far from this [converting non-Christians to the truth of the Gospel] being a violation of the liberty of conscience, it is a mark of respect for that liberty when we give the opportunity of choosing a way of life which seems noble and praiseworthy even to those who do not believe in God. Can it be regarded as a crime against the liberty of another to proclaim in the spirit of joy the Gospel which we have received from the all-merciful God? Why should it be only errors and falsehood, the unworthy and obscene which may be proposed? Can it be right that these should be inculcated as, alas, they frequently are, through the persuasive and pernicious propaganda of the mass media or as a result of the undue tolerance of legislation, or the cowardice of good men and the audacity of the evil?"[11]

On these assertions, we Hindus, to take one instance, are ones who are mired in "error and falsehood", what our teachers and scriptures propose, what our temples and traditions embody is "unworthy and obscene". So, naturally, the Church must have the unfettered right to convert us to the truth! Indeed, more than a mere right is involved.

"To proclaim Christ and his kingdom with all due respect for others is not merely the right of the evangelizer," the Church asserts, "it is his duty...." And the question is not just whether those others – we Hindus, for instance – can be saved without the Gospel, but "can we ourselves be saved?"[12] In a word, if you put any impediment in the way of the Church, you are not just thwarting the right of non-Christians, you are preventing Christians from being saved!

Nor is the right of the non-Christians limited to merely hearing the good news about Jesus, nor is the duty of the Church limited to merely broadcasting the good news about Jesus, the Church insists. The non-Christian has a right to be

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[11] *Ibid.*, 80.

[12] *Ibid.*, 80.

converted! The Church has a duty to convert! How emphatically the proclamation puts this, and with what typical circumlocution:

> For evangelization will never achieve its full force and significance unless it is received, accepted and adopted, and unless it evokes the wholehearted allegiance of those who hear it. A man may assent to the truths which a merciful God has revealed, but he will give a much deeper and fuller assent to the spirit and way of life – that is a life now transformed – which these truths propose to him. In a word, a man gives his allegiance to the kingdom, that is to 'a new world', a state of things, a new manner of existence, a new way of life, of communal life, which the Gospel inaugurates. This allegiance, which cannot abstract from the external circumstances of life, is expressed *by the visible and objective entry of man into the community of the faithful.* Therefore those who have experienced this conversion enter into a community which by its very nature is a sign of transformation and of a new life: that community is the Church, the visible sacrament of salvation.[13]

Thus the Church brings to the non-Christian the message of Christianity because it is his right to hear it, and because it is the duty of the Church to bring it to him. But the bringing cannot be complete unless it consummates in conversion, in "the visible and objective entry of man into the community of the faithful," which is the same thing as the visible and objective repudiation by the person of his own community, the community of the faithless!

But even that is not the end! The Church proceeds,

> Finally, the man who has been evangelized becomes himself an evangelizer. This is the proof, the test of genuineness of his conversion. It is inconceivable that a man who has received the word and surrendered himself to the kingdom should not himself become a witness and proclaimer of the truth.[14]

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[13] *Ibid.*, 23.
[14] *Ibid.*, 24.

Talk of a person, given an inch, grabbing a mile! And notice the way the psychological screw is turned: if the new convert is less than zealous in converting others, he has failed "the test of the genuineness of his own conversion"!

The law of the land

Now, all this points to a real problem, and if it is neglected – as the growth of Bhindranwale was neglected for three murderous years, as the Babri mosque controversy was neglected for decades – grave consequences are bound to follow. That is not a warning, not a threat. It is a forecast – exactly at par with the forecasts which persons like me had made in regard to Punjab, the capitulation to fundamentalists over Shah Bano, the shutting of eyes to the conversions in Meenakshipuram, and, of course, the Babri mosque. On each of those occasions, our forecast – that the capitulation and neglect would stoke a mighty reaction – was dismissed as the hallucination of communalists. In regard to each matter, those forebodings came true. I do hope that will not be the sequence again.

The problem is this. Even these introductory extracts show, the singular objective of all churchmen in India is conversion, or, to use their term, the harvesting of souls for Jesus. Their documents and publications show that in their reckoning everything they do is, and should be an instrument for attaining this singular objective. Moreover, because of severe problems which the Church is facing in places like Europe, church-groups have made India a special target for the coming decades.

But this activity flies in the face of our law.

Because of the severe tensions which had been caused by conversion activities of the Church and Islamic organizations like the *Tabligh*, several members argued in the Constituent Assembly that, while guaranteeing the freedom to profess,

practice and propagate one's religion, the Constitution should explicitly prohibit conversions brought about by force, fraud or allurement. Christian members objected. The point got mixed up with an amendment prohibiting conversions – of all manner and kind – of minors. Eventually, the matter was deferred. Two observations – "soporifics" would be the more appropriate word – proved vital. Sardar Patel said that, in any case, anything done by force, fraud or allurement was illegal, hence in a sense it was not necessary to incorporate an explicit provision of the kind which was being proposed. Second, B.R. Ambedkar observed that the fact that the provision was not being incorporated in the Constitution did not prevent legislatures from enacting laws on the question when the need arose in the future.

As a result of the compromise, Article 25(1) provides, "Subject to public order, morality and health and to the other provisions of this part, all persons are equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right to freely profess, practice and propagate religion."

Two points are evident even without any complicated analysis. The right is not an absolute one: it is given "subject to public order, morality and health and to the other provisions of this part." Therefore, to take one instance, even if the right to convert is said to follow from this Article, if the scale of conversions is such, if the means that are being used to obtain them are such that they endanger public order, the State has not just the right but the duty to scotch them. The proviso "and to other provisions of this part" is even more far-reaching. For not just that part of the Constitution, the very Article provides that "Nothing in this Article shall affect the operation of any existing law or prevent the State from making any law (a) regulating or restricting any economic, financial, political or other secular activity which may be associated with religious practice; (b) providing for social welfare and reform...." Receiving money from abroad for

conversions, the overt and covert political role of churchmen and church bodies in politics in the Northeastern states, in the Jharkhand area, in Kerala, their growing intervention even in General Elections through the "guidelines" that churchmen have started issuing to Christian voters – such activities obviously fall within the scope of the proviso.

Second, as the Article explicitly states, this is a right to which "all persons are equally entitled." That means, for instance, that as Christian missionaries claim that they have the right under this Article to convert Hindus to Christianity, Hindu organizations have an equal right to reconvert them from Christianity to Hinduism.

Christian missionaries and organizations like *Tabligh* have been claiming that they have the fundamental right to carry on their conversion work because this Article guarantees to each person, not just the right to "profess and practice" the religion of his choice, but also the right to "propagate" it.

It turns out that this assertion has been conclusively nailed by the Supreme Court. What happened is as follows. [At the height of the noise which had been raised over "atrocities on Christians" in late 1998-early 1999, Surya Prakash drew attention in *The Pioneer* to this unambiguous judgment. The secularists looked the other way, as usual.]

Because of the large tribal populations they have, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh have been specially targeted by Christian missionaries. Tensions had mounted even in the fifties. Eventually, both states passed Acts – as Dr. Ambedkar had envisaged – prohibiting conversions by force, fraud and allurement. The Acts were challenged. In *Yulitha Hyde's* case the Cuttack High Court struck down the Orissa Act. The Madhya Pradesh High Court upheld the Madhya Pradesh Act. The matter came to the Supreme Court.

The judgment – *Rev. Stainislaus* vs. *State of Madhya Pradesh,* AIR 1977 SC 908 – was delivered not by some one judge of the Supreme Court. Not by what is known as a

Division Bench – of two judges. Not even by what is known as a Full Bench – of three judges. It was delivered by a Bench of five judges.

And the judges happened to be ones whom no secularist, and certainly no Congressman would fault! The bench was headed by none other than Chief Justice A.N. Ray – the very judge to make whom the Chief Justice, Mrs. Indira Gandhi superseded three distinguished judges, the very judge who rendered such sterling service throughout the Emergency. The second judge was Justice M.H. Beg – who followed A.N. Ray in the Chief Justice's chair. The others were Justice R.S. Sarkaria, Justice P.N. Shingal and Justice Jaswant Singh – each a person with impeccable secular credentials. And the judgment was delivered not at some time when "communal forces" held sway. It was delivered when Mrs. Gandhi held the country in her fist – during the Emergency, in January, 1977.

After delineating the dictionary meaning of the word "propagate", and considering the arguments which had been urged, the Supreme Court held that "what the Article grants is not the right to convert another person to one's own religion, but to transmit or spread one's religion by an exposition of its tenets. It has to be remembered that Article 25(1) guarantees 'freedom of conscience' to every citizen, not just the followers of one particular religion, and that, in turn, postulates that there is no fundamental right to convert another person to one's own religion because if a person purposely undertakes the conversion of another person to his religion, as distinguished from his effort to transmit or spread the tenets of his religion, that would impinge on the 'freedom of conscience' guaranteed to all the citizens of the country alike."

In their unanimous judgment the five judges held that "we find no justification for the view that it [Article 25(1)] grants a fundamental right to convert persons to one's own religion. It has to be appreciated that the freedom of religion enshrined

in the Article is not guaranteed in respect of one religion only, but covers all religions alike, and it can be properly enjoyed by a person if he exercises his right in a manner commensurate with the like freedom of persons following the other religions. What is freedom to one, is freedom for the other, in equal measure, and there can, therefore, be no such thing as a fundamental right to convert any person to one's own religion."

As will be evident, the judgment of the Supreme Court is unambiguous. It has not been altered by any subsequent pronouncement. Hence, this is the law.

How does the singular pursuit of the Church – conversion – stand in the face of the law?

The law apart, this obsession with body-counts is ruinous – not the least for the Church itself: it has already drained the Church of all spirituality, exactly as Gandhiji had warned it would. Moreover, conversions on the scale the Church is aiming at, conversions by means missionaries claim are warranted – on the ground that the task for which they are being used is "divinely ordained" – such conversions are bound to invite a grim reaction.

And this is where the "success" of our secularists in preventing the State from taking corrective action – on this matter as on infiltration from Bangladesh, on the activities of Islamic fundamentalist groups, on reform of civil law – is pushing society into taking the law into its own hands. And in that lies a fatal difference. In contending with a problem, a State can act, it usually acts in an orderly manner. Society is too disorganized for its action to be orderly. Inundated by infiltrators, people cannot get to the authorities in Bangladesh, they will get at their neighbour in the adjoining slum. Incensed by mounting conversions, they cannot get to the Pope in Rome, or the evangelist headquarters in the USA, they will leap at the poor convert next door.

6

Igniting reaction

"The media through which the Gospel is propagated are primarily the schools, hospitals and orphanages," wrote the Niyogi Committee after receiving voluminous evidence to this effect during its inquiries into the workings of missionaries in Madhya Pradesh.

It quoted document after document of the Church which emphasized that evangelism must be the central focus and purpose of all activities. It quoted reports and publications about schools, etc., which stated in the clearest possible terms that the reason that the particular activity called for celebration was that it multiplied the number of converts.

It quoted the *Report of the World Conference of the International Missionary Council:* "Care should be taken to secure that evangelism has a central place in all medical and educational institutions." It quoted passages after passages from the Church periodical, the *Gharbandhu:*

> What is the advantage of the school to the Church? Schools are the means for expansion of the Kingdom;
> Here a preacher named Asaf Gudia has been sent who does the work of both preacher and teacher – because the objective of this mission circle is that through the school preaching about Christ should be accomplished;
> This way it is not some worldly school, it is a Christian school, the house for the propagation of Christ;
> The teacher takes it as his bounden duty that the word of Christ should take root in and flower in the students....;
> Great hopes are entertained that when they grow up the students shall accept Jesus as at present they are under the control of their parents....

It quoted the *Report of the Church of the Nazerene*: "Evangelism is our call. We make no excuse nor ask for any reservation in this period. Jesus has called us to preach the Gospel to every creature and we mean to do it in every phase of our work, be it educational, medical or distinctly evangelical. 'Go, teach, win,' is the command under which we work. We cannot lessen this emphasis." It reproduced the *Written statement on behalf of the Central India Baptist Mission* which the Baptist Mission had sent it: "Missionaries and Board members alike are increasingly aware of the need both for a dynamic programme of direct evangelism and the use of medicine and education in the development of the work." And so on.

It documented the use that was being made of schools, hospitals, even leprosy asylums for conversion. Even orphanages, in regard to which in a typical paragraph the Niyogi Committee concluded:

> Now as to Christian Orphanages, they are undoubtedly being run to multiply the population of Christians. A large number of such orphans were gathered into the Christian fold during famine, natural calamities like floods and earthquakes. There can thus be little doubt that special emphasis on spreading Christianity is given in dealing with young immature minds or those temporarily disabled by physical ailments. No wonder that the largest number of converts are from such backward classes living in areas where due to various causes only Mission schools and hospitals exist. Most conversions have been doubtless insincere admittedly brought about in expectation of social service benefits and other material considerations.

The Niyogi Committee documented the use by missionaries of means ranging from education and medicine, to calumnising figures revered by other religions – the report reproduced what Christian publications contained on Shiva, Krishna, Ram, Mohammed. It documented how even money lending was being used – money would be lent, when the time came to repay it, the borrower would be told that the

amount would be remitted if he and his family converted, in default of which he would have to repay it with interest. It listed instances of outright fraud.

Read, for instance, the extracts that the Committee reproduced from the instruction booklet, *Catholic Dharma ka Pracharak:*

> If you know for certain that the father will never agree to the baptism of his son, and you learn that the son is gravely ill, that he is close to death, then using the excuse of administering some medicine [*to davai ke bahane mein*] by some secret stratagem [*kisi gupt riti se*] sprinkle some water on his head and pronounce the words of baptism. O' preacher, you would have opened the doors of heaven for the child. Is that not good? Now, if every preacher puts himself to this task, how many children will get sent to heaven in a year!

A second extract from this instruction manual:

> If the relatives of the dying man do not let you sit in the house, then try and make them understand that your acquaintance is no bad thing. Almighty God will make him better. If this stratagem too does not work, then, using the excuse of administering medicine, gain access to him. In a word, use every device you can to save his soul.

This approach continues to this day – that every occasion is an opportunity to convert, that everything that is done must be a reaper for the harvesting. Take the most unlikely example. We look upon Mother Teresa as a symbol of compassion, of service. No one would associate the least parochialism with her. We have been conditioned to believe that she would rush to provide succour equally to anyone and everyone, that her love – the love she preached – would be unconditional, abundant and equal for all. Her own attitude was a bit more ambiguous, it would seem. Recall, for instance, her answers to *India Today:*

> *Q:* Some Muslims in Assam feel that you are espousing their cause. They have referred to your recent work in Beirut, where you saved stranded Muslim children.
>
> *A:* Not because they are Muslims. Please try and understand this. Be it

> Beirut, be it Assam, they are the children of God. We make no distinction of caste, creed or nationality....
> *Q:* As a Christian missionary, do you adopt a position of neutrality between Christian poor and other poor?
> *A:* I am not neutral. I have my faith.
> *Q:* Do you believe in conversion?
> *A:* To me, conversion means changing of heart by love. Conversion by force or bribery is a shameful thing. It is a terrible humiliation for anyone to give up religion for a plate of rice.
> *Q:* Just as the caste system in Hinduism is a fetter, do you feel that the labyrinthine regulations of the Catholic Church too are a fetter?
> *A:* I never felt that way. Nor do I feel the necessity to change the rules of the Catholic Church. It is not relevant, too. In the hour of death, we are going to be judged by what we have done to the poor. We have consecrated our lives to give wholehearted and free service for the poorest of the poor.
> *Q:* Can the Church do any wrong?
> *A:* No, as long as it stands on the side of God.
> *Q:* Mother, if you were born in the Middle Ages, and were asked, at the time of Galileo's inquisition, to take side, which would you have chosen – the Church or modern astronomy?
> *A:* (Smiling) The Church.[1]

Both affirmations simultaneously: "We make no distinction of caste, creed or nationality," as well as, "I am not neutral. I have my faith." Recall next the testimony that Christopher Hitchens cites about Mother Teresa's order. It is from Susan Shields, who worked for nine and a half years in the Sisters of Charity, the organization of Mother Teresa. This is what Shields reports,

> For Mother (Teresa), it was the spiritual well-being of the poor that mattered most. Material aid was a means of reaching their souls, of showing the poor that God loved them. In the homes for the dying, Mother taught the sisters how to secretly baptize those who were dying. Sisters were to ask each person in danger of death if he wanted a 'ticket to heaven'. An affirmative reply was to mean consent to baptism. The sister was then to pretend she was just cooling the

[1] *India Today*, 31 May, 1983.

> person's forehead with a wet cloth, while in fact she was baptizing him, saying quietly the necessary words. Secrecy was important so that it would not come to be known that Mother Teresa's sisters were baptizing Hindus and Moslems.[2]

A literal adherence to the instruction manual which the Niyogi Committee had reproduced 40 years ago.

Here before me is *The Thailand Report on Hindus*. Published by the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, it is the report of the Consultation on World Evangelization held at Pattaya, Thailand, from 16 to 27 June, 1980.

On the goal of the missionaries, the Consultation observed, ".... we are conscious that God longs for the whole Hindu people to know Jesus Christ and live under his Lordship (*Isa. 17:7, 8*)." Of themselves in relation to this divinely-ordained goal, the assembled missionary-experts said, "We.... sincerely repent that we have failed to be a blessing to the Hindus among whom God has placed us." "We rejoice in the activity of God in recent days," they said, and called for "world-wide prayer commitment for world-evangelization." "As a first and most important step, we call upon the Church world-wide, and specially the Church in India, to mobilize intensive and believing prayer for the reaching of the 565.5 million Hindus. We strongly believe that God is calling his people to active involvement in evangelizing Hindus in every part of the world."

The clap-trap apart about what God is longing for, notice how a few hundred million have just been chopped off from the population of Hindus! As has been documented in *Missionaries in India*, this miracle of the Church is an exact continuation of what was done through census-redefinition by the British rulers in the 1920s and 1930s – in the face of protests from their own Census officers who knew the reality

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[2]Christopher Hitchens, *The Missionary Position*, Verso, London, 1995, p. 48.

on the ground, to divide society, they began lopping off chunks: the Sikhs first, the tribals next, the scheduled castes thereafter.

Notice too the concluding words: "....Hindus in every part of the world." These missionary-experts concluded that Indians who had settled abroad, and whose links with their mother-culture had thus been weakened by exposure to the West, are a group that would yield a specially rich harvest: "The main concern of the recently established Fellowship of South Asian Christians (organized at the Overseas Indians Congress on Evangelism, June 9-15, 1980) is the evangelization of South Asians living abroad. This should become a dynamic force for evangelism of Asians, many of whom are Hindus, scattered in countries other than their homeland."

The report lists elements of Hindu beliefs which can be turned to advantage. It lists case studies to highlight the techniques which work: "family head responds through unusual circumstances," it counsels; "Miraculous healing convinces many," it records; "Social concern softens the community," it points out; "Repeated exposure to the Gospel bears fruit," it shows; "A period of teaching and discussion precedes reaping in high-caste community," it demonstrates by recounting how a group of Reddys in Andhra was harvested; "Initial contact through students," it counsels....

It also lists "Theological blocks" which stand in the way of fulfilling God's longing to harvest the Hindus. The very thing which the secularists say is the essence of India-independently-of-Hinduism, these missionary-experts list as a block in the way of God! "Four particular theological barriers to effective communication with Hindus should be highlighted," it says. First that "Hindus in general are syncretistic: They believe that all religions lead to God, implying thereby that there is therefore no need to change from one religion to another. Indeed, Hindus find the very mention of change of religion by the Christian highly

objectionable. Such demands must be presented with clarity and respect...."

Every group is viewed instrumentally, every device is assessed for its potentiality as an instrument for harvesting. Recall how ostentatious the Church has been in putting up a show of concern for the Scheduled Castes. And see what an instrumental view it actually has of them. "Our commitment to evangelism must seek to reach people in community," the missionary-experts say. Ambiguous enough to be unexceptionable, it seems at first sight. "We must, therefore, be sensitive to the complexity of communal acceptance" – elliptical at first sight. And then the truth comes out: "Two problems present particular difficulties. In our enthusiasm for individual conversion we may erect barriers to acceptance among the majority. If, as frequently occurs, the first converts are those who are socially isolated for one reason or another from the community, premature reaping may create serious barriers to the establishment of the Body of Christ in that area. We must exercise patience as we sow the seed, create a hunger, and work for the conversion of the opinion leaders in the community...."

"Premature reaping," "sow the seed, create a hunger, and work for the conversion of the opinion leaders of the community...." In a word, save the wretched soul, but in a way and at a time when it will subserve the singular goal – that is, when it will help the Church multiply!

There is a "strategy for social concern" too. "....(iii) Do not give room for suspicion on the part of the government or the public. (iv) Practise a servant-leadership (*John* 20-21). (v) Whenever possible, relate social service to evangelism: (a) Christian compassion can be rightly expressed only by Christian believers. They alone can seek to express the concerns of Jesus Christ for the salvation of those served. (b) Long term planning and budgeting of the local church for social service should reflect the priority of the evangelization of the non-Christian community around them...."

The missionary-experts stress how fecund a device distributing "literature" free can be for the harvest – especially among villagers, etc.: "'Christian Groups' formed as a result of the distribution of gospels by *Every Home Crusade*, are proving to be a distinctly fruitful ministry. In many villages, totally without Christians or churches, many Hindus have accepted the Lord. These new converts are formed into small groups in homes for fellowship and Bible study.... At present, over 1,500 groups of this kind are the result of this type of literature ministry."

They point out that in a society in which literacy levels are low, it is "radio evangelism" which will prove the "real boon." But the use of this medium requires careful calibration, the missionary-experts emphasize: "Only a programme prepared after careful audience research will produce results. For example, the vernacular transmissions prepared by Trans World Radio and broadcast on medium wave have revolutionised the broadcasting scene in India. In most parts of the country, people, as they tune in to medium wave, will invariably stumble on these Christian broadcasts...." "India's commercial film industry is ranked highest in the world for years," they stress, "....Christians should take note and meet people where they are, using this valuable tool for evangelism. Systematic follow-up is essential." And of course the latest harvester, television: "Television is new and popular with the middle class and upper class in cities," the far-seeing missionary-experts write in 1980, "Christian programmers should be keen to take the various opportunities offered by Government, especially on Christian festival days."

Much is made by secularists of the Church being open to "dialogue". But it is to be just an instrument for harvest-work, the missionary-experts warn. "The use of dialogue in reaching people has to be carefully considered," they write. "This method paves the way for a sharing of experiences, and provides an opportunity for frank interchange in

conversation. It provides an atmosphere in which both parties can understand each other, and creates a mutual bond of friendship and appreciation. *However, it must not end there. It must lead to proclaiming Christ as Lord.* This method finds a ready reception among the intelligentsia and in the western countries where there is a strong Hindu influence. *The purpose of dialogue should be carefully and constantly borne in mind. It should not simply end in dialogue.*"

Prayer-groups should be formed, the missionary-experts prescribe. They should focus on a specific target-group, and until a specific consummation: "Their primary commitment to the Lord will be to pray for their adopted community until a cluster of evangelizing churches is planted among them." The groups should hold "regular and intensive prayer meetings for the Hindu world in general, and their people-group specifically." Not just some general prayer, mind you: "They should pray for spiritual bondage to be broken (2 *Cor.* 4:3-4; *Acts* 26:18), and for many to come to the Lord (*Matt.* 9:36-38). Further as soon as evangelistic work begins within the people-group, they should pray for the missionaries there (*Col.* 4:2-3)."

Our friends are full of useful marketing tips! "(i) As far as possible, churches must encourage converts to continue to relate to their own community and to win it to Christ.... (iv) Follow a suitable life-style, which helps identification with villagers. (v) Use indigenous forms of communication, such as drama, *bhajans* and *katha, sat sang* (dialogue), etc. ....(vii) Challenge local churches to identify receptive communities and become involved in reaching them. (viii) Form prayer cells among new converts to keep before them the vision and burden to evangelise their own people...."

High priority must be given to work among Hindu women, they say, "since they are the custodians of the faith." And for this they suggest various devices: "....(b) the local churches should motivate and encourage Christian women to work chiefly among Hindu women in a holistic ministry using

bridges like the following: (i) Christian festivals, (ii) Sewing and cooking classes, (iii) Adult literacy classes, (iv) Hospital visitation, (v) Neighbourhood children's work, (vi) Neighbourhood Bible studies...." "Rejected and neglected groups, such as prostitutes and prisoners, should be a vital target for evangelism."

"When female Hindu college students become Christians," our missionary-experts observe, "they often receive no nurture after leaving college. Hence, they easily slip back into the religious and cultural customs of their homes." Accordingly they prescribe various devices to prevent this lapsing back: "....Those who have won them to Christ must consider seriously their responsibility for constant nurture.... Christian homes in their community should be sought out for the purpose of spiritual nurture and establishment, including marriage arrangements if necessary...."

High school and university students offer "great opportunities", the missionary-experts say, and exhort, "The Christian Church should take advantage of this opening by effective reach out." Again, they are expertise itself in locating vulnerable, susceptible groups: "(a) Students from a traditional Hindu home appear open to the Gospel, due to the breakdown of their religiosity, while in the secular atmosphere of the college/university. (b) Students coming from a rural background to study in a city are open to Christian influence through friendship. (c) The students of other language areas studying in linguistically strange areas are open for friendship from Christian youth (e.g., a Bengali North Indian studying in an engineering/medical/technical college in Hyderabad)...." And they list a "suggested strategy": "....Keep an open home; adopt international students as your own; take them to church/picnics, etc.... Train Christian students to develop close friendships with Hindu students.... Help them financially when they are genuinely needy...."

The 1993 handbook and guide *Operation World,* urges the

same instrumental approach. Target the families of AIDS patients, target the leprosy patients, target the blind.... And all this is camouflaged by a euphemism: ever so often these publications use the words "targeting", "harvesting" directly; when – as in the case of AIDS patients, leprosy patients or the blind – it would be manifestly galling to use such words, the publications instruct the missionary about the targets on which he must focus his efforts by saying, "pray for...." !

Medical work? "The Emmaneul Hospitals Association has responsibility for all the institutions that were run by evangelical missions," *Operation World* notes. "Pray that the witness going out from these hospitals to the many patients may lead many to seek the Saviour.... All over India the proportion of Christian medical workers is high; pray that many non-Christians may be won to Jesus through them." *Christian radio?* It has already "won a huge audience among Christians and non-Christians," *Operation World* states. "Although there is no Christian broadcasting from stations within India, more than 20 studios prepare programmes for broadcasting by TWR Sri Lanka and Guam (24 languages), FEBA Seychelles (18 languages and 250 programmes a week) and FEBC Manila (4). Weekly there are 295 hours of broadcasting in a total of 35 languages. TWR broadcasts in the early morning have gained an audience of millions. Pray for wise long-term strategies that will lead to effective evangelism and church-planting – perhaps by radio alone...." Notice not just the manner in which everything is viewed, but the enormous network which is already bent to the task of harvesting us....

Everything an instrument, specially the new convert. Every need and difficulty of the other an opportunity: "The oppressed and the poor have always been receptive to the Gospel down the centuries in India and elsewhere....," notes the Evangelical Church of India on its Internet site. "The poor have a natural capacity to put their trust on almost anything. They are not dogmatic. This has always been the 'entry

point' in the structure of any society, through which we can easily enter.... The suppressed and the 'untouchablcs' have often thought that it was prestigious for them to become Christians and find a place in the society by embracing Christianity...."

The entire enterprise is manifestly contrary to the law of the land as laid down by the Supreme Court. Yet if you so much as ask a question about it, you are communal, you are "justifying the pogrom."

The figure of history

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"But how can we disobey the command of our Lord?"

"But when he saw the multitudes, he was moved by compassion on them," Matthew reports, "because they fainted, and were scattered abroad, as sheep having no shepherd. Then saith he unto his disciples, the harvest truly is plenteous, but the labourers are few; Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he will send forth labourers into His harvest."[1] And a while later, Jesus is telling them how they will be persecuted for believing in him and spreading his message, but how they must persevere: "What I tell you in darkness," he exhorts them, "that speak ye in light: and what ye hear in the ear, that preach ye upon the housetops...."[2] And so also in Mark, "For whosoever will save his life, will lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the Gospel's, the same shall save it...."[3] And again, later in Mark, we have Jesus warning his disciples, "But take heed to yourselves: for they shall deliver you up to councils; and in the synagogues ye shall be beaten: and ye shall be brought before rulers and kings for my sake, for a testimony against them. And the Gospel must first be published among all nations ."[4]

Armed with such exhortations, the missionaries assert, "It isn't just that it is our right, it is our duty. For our Lord, Jesus Christ, has commanded us to go to all the nations of the world, and spread his message and baptize," and demand, "How can we disobey his command and still claim to be Christians?"

[1] *Matthew*, 9.36-38.
[2] *Matthew*, 10.27.
[3] *Mark*, 8.35.
[4] *Mark*, 13.9-10.

Exhortations to spread the word are interspersed at several places in the Gospels. They are ascribed to Jesus. Jesus may have delivered himself of them, or, as we shall see, they may have been inserted to meet the needs of the nascent Church.

Evolution of the law

The first point, of course, is that the assertion of missionaries or others that converting others to Christianity is a part of being Christian does not settle the matter. Till twenty years ago, a few passages taken by themselves in some of the judgments could be taken to mean that in the view of the Supreme Court the authorities of a religion are the ones who would decide which practice was an essential part of that religion. That view had reached its culmination in the *Sardar Syedna Taher Saifuddin Saheb* case in 1962.[5] The Court held that what was an essential ingredient of a religion was to be decided primarily with reference to the doctrines of that religion, that the recognized authorities of that religion – in that case the dictatorial Syedna of the Bohras – were the ones who were the ones to affirm what that doctrine was, and, furthermore, that Article 25 protected not just the doctrine but also practices which flowed from it. On these grounds, the Court upheld the right of the Syedna to excommunicate Bohras from the flock, and to impose all the penalties that he decided flowed from excommunication.

Even as those judgments were being delivered, the Court was aware that such a doctrine – of letting the recognized authorities of a religion have the last word on which practice is essential to a religion – was bound to run into difficulties. For one thing, recognized authorities of the religion as often as not were not in agreement among themselves – the Deobandis, Wahabis, Ahle Hadis, to say nothing of Shias have declared each other to be *Kafirs* on questions such as whether one is to kiss one's thumbs after pronouncing the name of the

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[5] *1962 Supp. 2 S.C.R.* 496.

Prophet. For this obvious reason, in *Govindlalji v. State of Rajasthan,* Justice Gajendragadkar said, "In cases where conflicting evidence is produced in respect of rival contentions as to competing religious practices the Court may not be able to resolve the dispute by a blind application of the formula that the community decides which practice is an integral part of its religion, because the community may speak with more than one voice and the formula would, therefore, break down." Accordingly, the judge concluded, "This question will always have to be decided by the Court and in doing so, the Court may have to enquire whether the practice in question is religious in character, and if it is, whether it can be regarded as an integral or essential part of the religion...."[6]

That difficulty can be shown to be so frequent an occurrence as to puncture the principle that the Court had accepted in the case of the Syedna. The more important consideration, however, is that the doctrine these early judgments had tended to accept was manifestly a dangerous, indeed untenable doctrine. *Jihad* to exterminate or convert *Kafirs* can most certainly be shown to be a doctrine intrinsic to Islam. And the most revered authorities of Islam have held it to be so. Does that mean that believers in India are to be free to practice it because of Article 25? Or consider the matter from another point of view. If Christians can insist that they have a right and duty to convert non-Christians to Christianity because Jesus asked them to do so, Muslims too can insist that they too have as overriding a right to do so because Muhammad ordered them not to rest till the entire world had been converted into a *dar-ul-Islam*. Is India then to be left to become a battleground where these totalitarian claims slug it out?

Accordingly, since those early decisions, in a series of judgments the Supreme Court has laid down that (a) practices associated with a religion are to be distinguished from

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[6] *Govindlalji v. State of Rajasthan, A. 1963 S.C.* 1638, para 58.

practices which are essential and integral to the practice of that religion; (b) that only these core practices are protected by Articles 25 and 26, and that too only to the extent that is allowed by those Articles; most important (c) the courts are the ones that shall decide which practices are essential to the practice of a religion; and (d) in doing so they shall not be guided by what the practice is in some other country practicing that religion, nor by what has been held by States and rulers subscribing to that religion in the past, but by the Constitution and laws of India, and by what has been approved by Indian courts.[7]

That point is by itself sufficient to rule out of court the assertion that, as Jesus or Muhammad commanded the faithful to convert others, believers have an overriding, peremptory duty, and therefore under Article 25, a fundamental right to do so. And there is another point: on what authority can it be said that Jesus actually commanded Christians to convert everyone they could to Christianity?

The point apart that the claim cannot stand in law, how much weight can one attach to the claim itself? What exactly is Jesus supposed to have said? How do we know he said that?

Answers to these questions are vital in themselves – they are central to believing the claim or setting it aside. They are doubly important because they lead us to a fundamental point, indeed to what is the fundamental fraud in missionary activity. Let us take an example.

A typical sequence

The bare sequence is as follows. Jesus has been nailed to the Cross. He dies. His body is interred. A large stone is placed to close the tomb. Devotees visit the tomb. The body

[7]Some of the judgments, in particular the Supreme Court's opinion in response to the Presidential Reference on Ayodhya, are analyzed in my "Steps towards Secularism," in *The Ayodhya Reference, Supreme Court Judgment and Commentaries*, Voice of India, New Delhi, 1995, pp. 156-74.

is missing. Jesus appears to disciples. He speaks to them.

Now, let us take the sequence step by step. As everyone knows, there are four Gospels – by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. In the eyes of the Church each is a saint. Every word of each Gospel is the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

Who goes to the tomb? For what purpose? "Mary Magdalene and the other Mary to see the sepulchre," says Matthew.[8] "Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome," says Mark, as they "had bought sweet spices, that they might come and anoint him."[9] "Mary Magdalene, and Joanna, and Mary the mother of James, and other women that were with them," says Luke, "bringing the spices which they had prepared."[10] John reports Mary Magdalene alone as having gone to the tomb.[11] Thus: from Mary Magdalene alone, to her and the other Mary, to the two of them and Salome, to the two of them and Joanna plus the other women who were with them. Similarly, whoever went, the purpose was either to "see the sepulchre" or to anoint the body. For the latter purpose, they were carrying sweet spices which they had either bought or prepared themselves.

What happened when, whoever went, arrived at the tomb? "And, behold, there was a great earthquake," says Matthew, "for the angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat upon it."[12] Mark mentions no earthquake, no angel descending; instead he says that, while on their way the women had been asking each other "who shall roll us away the stone from the door of the sepulchre?," when they arrived they saw that the stone had already been rolled away.[13] Luke too does not report any earthquake, he too says that when the women arrived they found the stone to have been rolled away.[14] According to John, Mary Magdalene alone had gone. He too mentions

[8] *Matthew*, 28.1. [9] *Mark*, 16.1. [10] *Luke*, 24.1, 10.
[11] *John*, 20.1. [12] *Matthew*, 28.2. [13] *Mark*, 16.3-4.
[14] *Luke*, 24.2.

neither an earthquake, nor any angel descending. But he too reports that she found the stone to have been rolled away already.[15]

Upon reaching the tomb, upon seeing the stone rolled away, whom do they encounter? An angel, says Matthew, sitting on the stone he has rolled away, "his countenance was like lightning, and his raiment white as snow," and so awesome was his presence that "and for fear of him the keepers. [that is, the guards] did shake, and became as dead men."[16] According to Mark, they encounter not an angel, but "a young man", sitting, not on the stone outside the entrance to the tomb, but "on the right side" inside the sepulchre. [The women see him *after* entering the sepulchre.] The young man is "clothed in a long white garment" – not dazzling like lightning, just ordinary white. And upon encountering a young man unexpectedly inside the tomb, the ones who are "affrighted" are the women – there is no mention of guards.[17] Luke reports no angel, nor does he report one young man. According to him the women encountered "two men.... in shining garments."[18] John has Mary Magdalene going alone, she encounters no one.[19] Thus, from "an angel", to "one young man," to "two men", to no one.

One woman, two sets of three women, or more than three women have reached the tomb. They have encountered an angel, or one young man, or two, or none. The women see that the body of Jesus is missing.

What happens next? Do not be afraid, the angel tells them, Matthew says. You are looking for the Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he is risen. "Go quickly and tell his disciples that he is risen from the dead; and, behold, he goeth before you into Galilee; there shall ye see him." The women depart quickly "with fear and great joy," and run to the disciples. But on the way, Jesus meets them. "All hail", he says. They fall at his feet, they hold his feet, they worship

[15] *John*, 20.1.
[16] *Matthew*, 28.2-4.
[17] *Mark*, 16.5-7.
[18] *Luke*, 24.4.
[19] *John*, 20.1-2.

him. "Be not afraid", Jesus says, "Go tell my brethren that they go into Galilee, and there shall they see me."[20]

According to Mark, neither the angel at the tomb nor Jesus on the way asks them to give that message to the disciples. That one young man does so – at the tomb itself.[21]

According to Luke the conversation takes place with the two men at the tomb. Not only are the words that are exchanged different. No one – not the angel, not one man, not Jesus, not either of the two men – asks the women to tell the disciples that Jesus is going to Galilee ahead of them and that they will see him there.[22]

According to John, what transpired was altogether different. Mary Magdalene goes alone. She sees that the stone has been removed, and the body is missing. She runs "to Simon Peter and to the other disciple, whom Jesus loved," and informs them that the body is missing. Simon Peter and the other disciple run to the sepulchre. They see for themselves, and return home. Mary, on the other hand, continues to stand outside, weeping. She looks into the sepulchre and sees two angels "in white sitting, the one at the head, and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain." And then Jesus himself appears to her.[23] Jesus appears to her – as in Matthew. But there are three differences. In Matthew Jesus appears to the two Marys, in John he appears to Mary Magdalene alone. In Matthew he appears as the two Marys are rushing to the disciples, in John he appears when Mary Magdalene, having informed two of the disciples, returns with them to the sepulchre. And, third, in Matthew, Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of James, at once recognize him, they fall at his feet, they hold his feet, and worship him.[24] But in John, even when she sees Jesus standing in front of her, she does not recognize him. Instead, she takes him to be the gardener.[25]

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[20] *Matthew*, 28.5-10. [21] *Mark*, 16.7. [22] *Luke*, 24.5-7.
[23] *John*, 20.1-14. [24] *Matthew*, 28.9. [25] *John*, 20.14-15.

Jesus speaks to her in John, as Jesus does in Matthew – though in the latter to two Marys, not one; though in the latter he speaks to them on their way to the disciples, and not at the tomb when one of them has later returned with the disciples. But what he says is altogether different. In Matthew he says, "Be not afraid: go tell my brethren that they go into Galilee, and there they shall see me."[26] In John, Jesus tells Mary Magdalene, "Touch me not;[27] for I am not yet ascended to my Father: but go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God."[28] No word about going to Galilee!

To proceed. The women have seen that the body is missing. They have or have not been told by an angel, by one man, by two men or by Jesus to tell the disciples one thing or something altogether different.

Whom do they go and tell? In Matthew, they run to get the message to the disciples – that they get to the disciples can only be inferred. For the account is overtaken by other happenings. First, as we have seen, Jesus himself appears to them. Second, the Gospel diverts to narrate a conspiracy of the Jews – one which none of the other three Gospels mentions: noticing that the body is missing, the guards go to the chief priests who are at that time in assembly with the elders; there a conspiracy is hatched: to deny that Jesus has risen, the guards are to say that they had fallen asleep and, as they slept, the followers of Jesus whisked away his body. The guards are paid, and guaranteed protection. And on this basis the Jews get a concoction to deny the Resurrection unto this day.[29]

In Mark, the women tell no one: after the conversation with the young man, Mark informs us, "they went out quickly, and fled from the sepulchre; for they trembled and were amazed: neither said they any thing to any man; for they were

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[26]*Matthew*, 28.10.

[27]In Matthew, the two Marys hold him by the feet.

[28]*John*, 20.17.

[29]*Matthew*, 28.11-15.

afraid."[30] It is in what is acknowledged even in the printed Bibles to be one of three different endings to the Gospel of Mark that we are told that the women went to "Peter and his friends" and conveyed what they had been told.[31]

In Luke, the women convey the message to "the eleven disciples and all the rest."[32]

In John, Mary Magdalene, who alone has gone to the tomb, goes and tells not, for instance, "the eleven disciples and all the rest," she tells "Simon Peter and the other disciple, whom Jesus loved."[33]

But, of course, as she has not encountered anyone at the tomb at this stage, she has no message to convey – neither about going to Galilee nor about Jesus ascending to the Father. All she conveys is that the body is missing.

Informed or not, having received only the news of the missing body or having received that as well as a message, having received one message or an entirely different one, which of the disciples goes to the tomb?

In Matthew no one goes to the sepulchre. The eleven disciples proceed to Galilee.[34]

In Mark, no one goes to tell the disciples that the body is missing – the women having been struck dumb by fear. So, no occasion arises for the disciples to go to the sepulchre. Subsequently, Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene. She tells them. But "they, when they had heard that he was alive, and had been seen of her, believed not."[35] In any event, no one goes to the sepulchre.

In Luke, the women narrate everything to the apostles. But, "their words seemed to them as idle tales, and they believed them not."[36] Peter alone gets up and rushes to the sepulchre.[37] Though later on, when they are talking to the

[30] *Mark*, 16.8.
[31] Third alternate, *Mark*, 16.9-10 in The *Good News Bible*, The Bible Society of India, Bangalore.
[32] *Luke*, 24.9. [33] *John*, 20.2. [34] *Matthew*, 28.16.
[35] *Mark*, 16.11. [36] *Luke*, 24.11. [37] *Luke*, 24.12.

resurrected Jesus, whom they take to be a stranger, two disciples speak of "certain of them which were with us" having gone to the sepulchre.[38]

In John, the information is conveyed not to all the apostles, Mary Magdalene informs only two – "Simon Peter and the other disciple, whom Jesus loved." And the two of them rush to the sepulchre.[39]

The body, having disappeared, Jesus appears. *To whom?* In Matthew he first appears to the two Marys when they are rushing to the disciples.[40] Subsequently, as he had promised, he appears to the eleven disciples at Galilee.[41]

In Mark he appears first to Mary Magdalene alone – the occasion is neither at the tomb, nor on the way to the disciples, but a different one, one situated indefinitely between these two.[42] After that he appears "in another form unto two of them, as they walked, and went into the country."[43] And finally he appears "unto the eleven as they sat at meat."[44] – where the conversation, tc which we shall just return, takes place.

In Luke he appears first to two of the disciples as they are on their way to a village called Emmaus "which was from Jerusalem about three-score furlongs." Jesus walks with them, he talks with them. But they do not recognize him for the longest time – it is only later after he vanishes that, seeing how their hearts burned as the stranger talked with them, that they realize who he was.[45]

They go to tell the eleven. Who say that he has appeared to Simon.[46] And as they are talking "Jesus himself stood in the midst of them." Jesus talks to them at length.[47]

In John, Jesus first appears to Mary Magdalene – outside the sepulchre when she has returned with two of the disciples. She takes him to be the gardener, as we have seen, till he addresses her by her name.[48]

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[38]*Luke*, 24.24. [39]*John*, 20.2-4. [40]*Matthew*, 28.9.
[41]*Matthew*, 28.16-17. [42]*Mark*, 16.9. [43]*Mark*, 16.12.
[44]*Mark*, 16.14. [45]*Luke*, 24.13-32. [46]*Luke*, 24.34.
[47]*Luke*, 24.36-50. [48]*John*, 20.14-17.

He next appears to the disciples as they have assembled behind shut doors "for fear of the Jews."[49]

He appears again to the disciples eight days later – this time doubting Thomas too is present.[50]

He appears a third time to his disciples at "the sea of Tiberias."[51] Extensive exchanges take place between Jesus and the disciples on this – the last – occasion.

By this uncertain route we reach the exhortation to carry the message to all nations. *But what precisely does Jesus say on the subject?*

In Matthew, after telling his disciples that all power has been given to him in heaven and in earth, Jesus says, "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen."[52]

In Mark, he upbraids them for "their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they believed not them which had seen him after he had risen." And then come the words relevant to our concern: "And he said unto them Go ye into all the world, and *preach the gospel* to every creature." "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned."[53] Notice that here Jesus is asking the disciples to go "and *preach the gospel* to every creature" – he is not asking them to baptize and convert the people they encounter. What he does is to forecast a future for those who believe and have been baptized, and for those who do not believe.

Incidentally, after this Jesus tells them: "And these signs shall follow them that believe; in my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues, they shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover."[54] Are the missionaries able to take up serpents? Are

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[49] *John*, 20.19-23. [50] *John*, 20.26-29. [51] *John*, 21.1-22.
[52] *Matthew*, 28.18-20. [53] *Mark*, 16.14-16. [54] *Mark*, 16.17-18.

they immune to poison? Do the sick recover as they touch them? Are there devils which missionaries drive away?

Thus, in a word, while in Matthew what Jesus says about baptism is an exhortation, in Mark it is an adjective. The even more consequential fact in this context is that the earlier manuscripts of the Gospel of Mark end at the 8th para of this chapter. Paras 9 to 20 – of which paras 15 to 18 which contain the exhortation form a part – are acknowledged, even in the printed versions of the Bible today, to be later add-ons.

In Luke, Jesus is at pains to convince the disciples that what has been visited upon him is in accord with what had been written in the scriptures. Luke adds, "And he said unto them, Thus it is written, and thus it behoved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day," "And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem."[55] Notice that here also Jesus is not asking them to convert and baptize, he is merely asking them to preach in his name – indeed, what he asks them to preach is also limited to "repentance and remission of sins."

John also reports at length the exchanges which Jesus has with his disciples when he reappears to them. There is not a word in these passages about going out, converting and baptizing, or even preaching to the others.

Would a claim based on so tenuous a foundation survive in any court assessing evidence?

Moreover, if it is deemed to be a duty of missionaries to convert, may it not be deemed to be a duty of those belonging to the targeted societies to provide true information to the targets about the creed which is seeking to convert them?

[55] *Luke*, 24.44-47.

8

"They have God as their author"

Ever since missionaries began their efforts to harvest our souls here, they have had four USPs, so to say: that their Lord, Jesus Christ, has been a historical figure, while our gods have been figments of imagination; that their Lord has been the more powerful Lord as he performed miracles which the others did not – walking on water, raising the dead, healing the sick, controlling the sea....; that all this is testified to in something they have and we do not, the Book – the Bible with its Old and New Testaments, and these, to recall the declaration of the First Vatican Council, "have God as their author"; and that, while our gods are mired in sin, their Lord is immaculate.

That last used to be a staple of missionary publications till the mid-fifties. Bereft of protection from the imperial power, these days the harvesters are circumlocutory on this point. But historicity is something they stress all the time. It can't mean anything by itself, Ram Swarup used to point out. After all, everyone holding this publication in his hands has that quality of historicity! But that does not make us unique in any way. Even so, our friends flaunt this claim a great deal.

Now, the principal, indeed almost the exclusive source of information about the life and deeds of Jesus consists of the four Gospels. Let us, therefore, examine in slightly greater detail a feature about them that we glimpsed while examining the claim of missionaries that they have been commanded by their Lord to harvest us. As we proceed, it will profit us to also take a quick sampling of what scholars – most of them devout Christians – say about the Gospels in

Europe and America. The literature on Biblical exegesis and scrutiny is by now an ocean by itself. For the corrective we need, it is not necessary to wade through this vast corpus. Popular encyclopedias will be enough: entries in them summarize scholarly theses, the entries are written by recognized scholars, the volumes are widely available in our libraries in India.

The claim that the Gospels have God as their author, and also that they set out historical facts, literally and unerringly true, is reiterated time and again by the Church till today. Vatican-II did so with full gravity and authority.

"The Word of God," "consigned to writing under the inspiration of the Divine Spirit," "they have God as their author," "God, the inspirer and author of both Testaments," "inspired by God and committed once and for all to writing, they impart the Word of God Himself without change," "the written Word of God," "the sacred Scriptures contain the Word of God and, since they are inspired, really are the Word of God" – such are the expressions by which Vatican-II described the Bible, in particular the Gospels, in its decree, *Dei verbum*, the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*.[1] A typical passage in *Dei verbum* puts the point thus,

> Those divinely revealed realities which are contained and presented in sacred Scripture have been committed to writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. For Holy Mother Church, relying on the belief of the Apostles (see *John*, 20:31; *2 Tim*. 3:16; *2 Peter* 1:19-21; 3:15-16), holds that the books of both the Old and New Testaments in their entirety, with all their parts, are sacred and canonical because, written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they have God as their author and have been handed on as such to the Church herself. In composing the sacred books, God chose men and while employed by Him they made use of their powers and abilities, so that with Him acting in them and through them, they, as true authors,

[1] *Dei verbum*, the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, 18 November, 1965, 9, 11, 16, 20, 21, 24.

consigned to writing everything and only those things which He wanted.

Therefore, since everything asserted by the inspired authors or sacred writers must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit, it follows that the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching solidly, faithfully and without error that truth which God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation. Therefore, 'all Scripture is divinely inspired and has its use for teaching the truth and refuting error, for reformation of manners and discipline in right living, so that the man who belongs to God may be efficient and equipped for good work of every kind.' (*2 Tim.* 3:16-17, Greek text.)[2]

So, it isn't that this assertion – that the Gospels and other parts of the Bible have God as their author – is some old, outdated belief which has since been diluted or abandoned for some more rational position. It is the current dogma of the Church. How does it stand up – even on the most elementary test?

The genealogy of Jesus: Two of the four Gospels – Matthew and Luke – give the genealogy of Jesus. Matthew lists the supposed ancestors from Abraham onwards.[3] Luke traces Jesus' supposed ancestors back all the way to Adam, and thence to God.[4] The enumeration preceding Abraham is, of course, not comparable, as Matthew does not mention the names. Therefore, let us put the two lists together from Abraham onwards, and see whether both can in any conceivable way be simultaneously true.

The genealogy of Jesus

In *Matthew*	In *Luke*
Abraham	Abraham
Isaac	Isaac
Judas	Jacob
Phares	Juda
Esrom	Phares
Aram	Esrom

[2] *Ibid.*, 11. [3] *Matthew*, 1.1-16. [4] *Luke*, 3.23-38.

Aminadab
Naasson
Salmon
Booz
Obed
Jesse
David, the King
Solomon
Roboam
Abia
Asa
Josaphat
Joram
Ozias
Joatham
Achaz
Ezekias
Manasses
Amon
Josias
Jechonias
Salathiel
Zorobabel
Abiud
Eliakim
Azor
Sadoc
Achim
Eliud
Eleazar
Matthan
Jacob
Joseph
Jesus

Aram
Aminadab
Naasson
Salmon
Booz
Obed
Jesse
David, the King
Nathan
Mattatha
Menan
Melea
Eliakim
Jonan
Joseph
Juda
Simeon
Levi
Matthat
Jorim
Eliezer
Jose
Er
Elmodam
Cosam
Addi
Melchi
Neri
Salathiel
Zorobabel
Rhesa
Joanna
Juda
Joseph
Semei
Mattathias
Maath
Nagge
Esli
Naum
Amos
Mattathias

Joseph
Janna
Melchi
Levi
Matthat
Heli
Joseph
Jesus

Thomas Paine put the contradictory lists to devastating use. In Matthew between Abraham and Jesus there are *thirty nine* generations. In Luke, on the other hand, between Abraham and Jesus there are *fifty five* generations! Between David and Jesus in Matthew there are *twenty seven* generations, and in Luke there are *forty two* generations! Of the *twenty six* names which occur in Matthew between David and Jesus, only *four* occur in *Luke* – there are three others with spellings close to each other. And among these few names which occur in both lists, the order differs! But both lists, originating as they do from God, occurring as they do in Gospels each word of which is true, are by definition true!

What is one to make of this divinely authored mix-up? "Both texts have to be eliminated as historical sources," says the *New Encyclopaedia Britannica*. And, with what is surely unintended irony, it adds, "They are nevertheless important for the development of Christology (doctrines on the nature of Christ), because they reveal the difficulty of reconciling the genealogical proof of Jesus' Davidic descent with the relatively late idea of his virgin birth." The comment of *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* is just as telling: "Davidic descent, conception through the Holy Spirit while his mother remained a virgin, homage at birth," it says, all "are clearly theological"[5] – that last being a euphemism, as we shall see, for the fact that the assertion is *what the Church has needed for the "theology", etc., which it is peddling.*

[5] *Encyclopaedia Britannica, Macropaedia,* Volume XXII, 15th edition, p. 340; and *The Oxford Companion to the Bible,* p. 356.

Jesus' virgin birth: The belief that is fostered is that the child was conceived between the betrothal and marriage of Joseph and Mary, by the intervention of the Holy Spirit. This is one of the most advertised marks of Jesus' divinity, and so it is surprising that neither the Gospel according to Mark, nor that according to John so much as mentions it. Matthew and Luke mention it, but with embarrassing differences. In *Matthew* the angel appears to Joseph: he tells Joseph that his betrothed maiden is going to have a child; Joseph is astonished; how come?, he demands; the angel explains that God has selected his wife-to-be for bringing His own Son into the world.[6] In Luke, on the other hand, the angel appears not to Joseph, but to Mary: the conversation he has with her is different, though the essential point is the same – though a virgin, she has conceived because of the Holy Spirit "coming on" her, etc.[7] But, of course, both Gospels "have God as their author."

Apart from the obvious fact – that the Church needs such miraculous claims – scholars point to a linguistic quirk that accounts for the story. Told that his virgin bride-to-be is pregnant, Joseph is flummoxed, and apprehensive about what this would entail for their reputations. The angel explains that the Holy Spirit has impregnated her, and it has done so for a purpose: "Now all this happened in order to make what the Lord had said through the prophet come true, 'A virgin will become pregnant and have a son, and he will be called Immaneul'...."[8]

The angel was referring to *Isaiah*, 7.14. In that sequence, God sends message after message to Ahaz to ask the Lord for a sign. Ahaz says he will not put God to a test. Isaiah scolds him for trying the patience of God, and adds, "Well then, the Lord himself will give you a sign: *a young woman* who is pregnant will have a son and will name him 'Immaneul'. By the time he is old enough to make his own decisions, people will be drinking milk and eating honey. Even before that time

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[6] *Matthew, 1.18-21.* [7] *Luke, 1.26-38.* [8] *Matthew,* 1.22-23.

comes the lands of those two kings who terrify you will be deserted."[9] Notice the words in the prophecy were *"a young woman."* That is what the Hebrew words meant. But about five hundred years after *Isaiah* was written, *The Good News Bible* notes, it was translated into Greek. The Hebrew word *alma* – meaning a "young woman" – got translated as "virgin", "and in this way," says the *Encyclopaedia Britannica,* "the Christian story came about."[10] But of course on so central a fact, the translations and retranslations too must be taken to "have God as their author"!

Virgin birth or not, *in which year was Jesus born?* Matthew, 2.1, says, "Jesus was born.... during the time when Herod was king." A few verses later Matthew recounts, "After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, 'Get up, take the child and mother, and go back to the land of Israel, because those who tried to kill the child are dead.'"[11] Now, Herod died in 3 BC: that would put the birth of Jesus in 3 or 4 BC at the latest! Luke puts a date to the climactic announcements of John the Baptist about the arrival of Jesus: "It was the fifteenth year of the rule of the Emperor Tiberius; Pontius Pilate was the Governor of Judaea, Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip was...."[12] These verses put the birth of Jesus in 2 or 1 BC. That is not all. For in an earlier passage Luke has specified yet another date: "At that time Emperor Augustus ordered a census to be taken throughout the Roman Empire. When this first census took place, Quirinius was the governor of Syria...."[13] Jospeh and Mary trek to Bethlehem – everyone has to register in his hometown, and that is when Jesus is born. A census did take place when Quirinius was governor. But the date for that was AD 6-7! Hence, Jesus was born in 3 or 4 BC, or in 2 or 1 BC, or in AD 6 or 7! And, of course, all three dates occurring as they do in two Gospels must be taken to "have God as their

[9] *Isaiah,* 7.10-16.
[10] *Encyclopaedia Britannica, Macropaedia,* Volume XXII, p. 340.
[11] *Matthew,* 2.19. [12] *Luke,* 3.1-3. [13] *Luke,* 2.1-3.

author"! But the millennium must be celebrated taking the birth to have occurred as decreed by the Church and other commercial establishments!

Whatever the year, *on what date was Jesus born?* "We have no knowledge of the specific day of his birth," writes Will Durant in his monumental history of civilization. "Clement of Alexandria (*ca* 200) reports diverse opinions on the subject in his day, some chronologists dating the birth April 19, some May 20; he himself assigned it to November 17, 3 BC. As far back as the second century the Eastern Christians celebrated the Nativity on January 6. In 354 some Western churches, including those of Rome, commemorated the birth of Christ on December 25." And that by mistake, it turns out! Durant adds, "This [December 25] was then erroneously calculated as the winter solstice, on which the days begin to lengthen; it was already the central festival of Mithraism, the *natalis invicti solis,* or birthday of the unconquered sun. The Eastern churches clung for a time to January 6, and charged their Western brethren with sun worship and idolatry, but by the end of the fourth century December 25 had been adopted also in the East."[14]

Whatever the year, whatever the date, *where was Jesus born?* Problem upon problem. Mark refers to Nazareth – not Bethlehem – as the "home town" of Jesus[15] From John's Gospel, it is evident that even when Jesus had become well-known, his having been born in Bethlehem was not known. On the contrary, people believed him to be from Nazareth. Jesus is on one of his visits to Jerusalem – we will hear more about these in a minute. Jesus has been preaching, his miracles have got known far and wide. Many say he is a prophet. Others say he is the Christ. Still others protest, "Shall Christ *come out of Galilee?* Hath not the scripture said, That Christ cometh out of the seed of David, and out of the town of

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[14]Will Durant, *Caesar and Christ,* Simon and Schuster, New York, 1944, p. 558.

[15]*Mark,* 6. 1.

Bethlehem, where David was?" The argument continues. The officers who have been sent to arrest Jesus return without doing so. The chief priests are livid. Why have you not brought him?, they demand. "Never man spake like this man," the officers say. The priests are adamant: the man is not to be believed, they declare. One who has been to Jesus in secret, objects: "Doth our law judge any man, before it hear him, and know what he doeth?," he asks. The priests answer: "*Art thou also of Galilee?* Search and look: *for out of Galilee ariseth no prophet.*"[16] On the other side, Matthew declares categorically, "Jesus was born in the town of Bethlehem in Judaea, during the time when Herod was king."[17] Luke reports that Joseph and Mary were staying in Nazareth. He has them travel to Bethlehem just before the birth: that census was to take place, everyone was ordered to be in his home town, and as Joseph was a descendant of David, they came to Bethlehem, the city where David had lived, and so, Jesus gets to be born in the city of David.[18]

That there was a spur for all this is widely acknowledged today. "Jesus came from the Galilean town of Nazareth, that is from the north of Palestine, which also boasted a fair number of Hellenistic cities (his birth in Bethlehem is a later theological interpretative fiction)," writes Helmut Koester.[19] "The tradition of Bethlehem as the place of Jesus' birth has its source in all probability in the Old Testament conception of the Messiah as a descendant of David....," write the authors of *Encyclopaedia Britannica.* "Both traditions [those of Mark and Luke] are to be judged as legendary variations of the theological theme of Jesus' messiahship, even though each in its own way assigns to his birth a place in history. The extent to which these texts are marked by theological motifs, above all by the thought that Jesus as Messiah fulfills the

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[16]*John*, 7.41-42, 51-52. [17]*Matthew*, 2.1. [18]*Luke*, 2.4.

[19]Helmut Koester, *Introduction to the study of the New Testament*, Volume II, *History and Literature of Early Christianity*, de Gruyter, Berlin and New York, 1982, p. 73.

promises of the Old Testament and the hope of Israel and the world, is shown by the numerous quotations woven into the stories."[20]

That euphemism again – "theological motifs"! In plain language the authors of the Gospels were propelled to situate the birth in Bethlehem because they were eager to establish that Jesus was the same Messiah who had been prophesied by the Old Testament. Hence his Davidic genealogy, hence his birth in what was taken to be David's city.

Jesus was the first to see the contradiction in making both claims simultaneously – on the one hand that he was the Messiah born to a virgin, and, on the other, that he was descended from David. If he was born of a virgin, that is if Joseph had nothing to do with his being conceived, where is the question of his being traced through Joseph back to David? The Gospel of Mark reports Jesus, the Messiah, himself raising this question: "And Jesus answered and said, while he taught in the Temple, How say the scribes that Christ is the Son of David? For David himself said by the Holy Ghost, The Lord said to my Lord [the Messiah], Sit thou on my right hand, till I make thine enemies thy footstool. David therefore himself calleth him [the Messiah] Lord; and whence is he [the Messiah] then his [David's] son? And the common people heard him [Jesus] gladly."[21]

But we must take all these contradictory things to be simultaneously true – Nazareth being the "home town" of Jesus but Jesus being born in Bethlehem, Jesus being born to a virgin but Jesus having descended from David *via* Joseph – for all these are stated in the Gospels, and these, as we know, "have God as their author"!

One way or another, at one place or another, on one date or another, in one year or another, Jesus has taken birth. *Who*

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[20] *Encyclopaedia Britannica, Macropaedia*, Volume XXII, p. 340.
[21] *Mark*, 12. 35-37.

come *bearing gifts?* According to Matthew three wise men from the East come. They see a star. The star keeps moving ahead of them, guiding them till they reach the house. There the star stands still. They enter, meet Mary and Joseph, and see the infant. Overwhelmed, they fall down, and worship the little child.[22] In Luke, on the other hand, the ones who come are not some wise men from the East, instead they are some local shepherds. And they are led to the house, not by some star, but by an angel.[23]

In any case, Jesus has been born, either some wise men from the East or some local shepherds have come, paid homage, given gifts. *What happens thereafter?* In Matthew, when the three wise men see the star and begin looking for Jesus, Herod hears that a child has been born, and that he will be the King of the Jews. Troubled, he sends for his chief priests and scribes, and questions them about the whereabouts of the child. In Bethlehem, they tell him, for so it is written in the scriptures. Then he sends for the wise men. He encourages them to look for the child. When you have located him, do come and tell me, for I too want to worship the infant, Herod tells them. The wise men locate the house, as we have seen, they worship the child, but instead of returning by the way they had come, they take another route, thereby evading Herod. They do so because God warns them in a dream that they should not return to Herod. When they have departed, back in the house, an angel appears to Joseph also, warns him that Herod will seek to destroy the child, and that he should immediately take the child and Mary, and flee to Egypt. The three escape in the dead of night. Herod is furious. He has all children who are two years and less in Bethlehem killed. Herod dies. An angel appears to Joseph, and tells him that it is now safe for them to return. They do so.[24]

In Luke, on the other hand, no angel asks Joseph to flee

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[22] *Matthew*, 2.1-12. [23] *Luke*, 2.8-20. [24] *Matthew*, 2.1-23.

with his family, Herod does not order that the children be killed, there is no flight to Egypt. Instead, once the mandatory days for the "purification" of Mary have passed, Joseph and Mary bring the little child to the Temple at Jerusalem, to present him to the Lord, and to offer as sacrifice a pair of turtledoves. At the Temple they encounter a just and true man who has been promised by God that he shall see the Lord's Christ before his death. Upon seeing the radiant child, he knows at once that this is the one for whom he has been waiting. He tells the parents what a blessing the child is . And then a prophetess sees the child, and gives thanks.[25] There is none of the tension and apprehension and urgency that Matthew has set out. And not just in these days immediately following the birth of Jesus. In fact, Luke portrays a tranquil, precocious childhood of this gifted child: "And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, filled with wisdom: and the grace of God was upon him."[26] Jesus is twelve years old. As they do every year, the parents visit Jerusalem for the Passover Feast. Jesus gets lost. The parents are distraught. They look for him. Eventually, three days later they find him in the Temple. He has been happily confounding the doctors.[27] "And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man."[28] What a contrast to the flight to Egypt in the nick of time, the slaughter of children, the return after the death of Herod.

From his birth and childhood there is a sudden jump to Jesus being baptized by John the Baptist – there is no account at all of the intervening years.

John and the baptizing of Jesus: Luke would have us believe that, like Jesus, John too was born as the result of God's intervention. Zacharias, a priest, and his wife, Elizabeth are by now old. They have no child. Zacharias is at the Temple. An angel, in fact Gabriel himself, appears, and

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[25] *Luke*, 2.22-39. [26] *Luke*, 2.40.
[27] *Luke*, 2.41-51. [28] *Luke*, 2.52.

tells him that his wife shall bear a child. But how?, Zacharias asks, "for I am an old man, and my wife well stricken in years." Gabriel informs him that it is the decision of God that Elizabeth should bear John. Indeed, when a little later Mary is troubled upon being told that she is pregnant though she is a virgin, the angel asks her to visit Elizabeth for she too is pregnant by God's design.[29] Surely, this mode of John's conception is as important a detail as any. Yet it does not occur in Matthew, it does not occur in Mark, it does not occur in John.

In any event, John is baptizing. He announces the coming of Jesus, and its significance for the world. People come from all over, confess their sins, and he baptizes them in the river. But when the Pharisees and Sadducees arrive, John berates them, "O generation of vipers, who has warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance: And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham. And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: therefore every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down and cast into the fire...."[30] In Luke also John uses the same rebuke: "O generation of vipers," he is reported as saying, "who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruits worthy of repentance, and begin not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, That God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham. And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: every tree therefore which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down and cast into the fire...."[31] In a word, except for the transposition of one "therefore," the words John hurls are the same. But while in Matthew the target at which he hurls them are the Pharisees and Sadducees, in

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[29] *Luke,* 1.5-20, 28-31, 36.
[30] *Matthew,* 3.7-8. [31] *Luke,* 3.7-11.

Luke it is "the multitude which came forth to be baptized of him"!

Soon, Jesus himself arrives to be baptized. John demurs – I should be the one who is baptized by you rather than the other way round, he says. Jesus makes him see the plan of God. The ceremony done, the heavens open, we learn in Mark and Luke, "And the Holy Ghost descended in a bodily shape like a dove upon him [Jesus], and a voice came from heaven, which said, Thou art My beloved Son, in thee I am well pleased."[32]

In Matthew, the words God speaks are not directed to Jesus but to the assembled people. God tells them, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."[33]

In John, God doesn't speak. John the Baptist says, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it abode upon him . And I saw, and bare record that this is the Son of God...."[34]

Are those vital words of John the Baptist or of God? Did God address them to Jesus or to the people who happened to be there?

Baptized, with God speaking or not, Jesus' ministry commences.

When does it commence? In the first three Gospels Jesus begins his independent ministry after John the Baptist is imprisoned: thus in Mark, "After John had been put in prison, Jesus went to Galilee and preached the good news from God...."[35] In John, on the other hand, Jesus commences his independent ministry before John is put in prison: thus, "After these things came Jesus and his disciples into the land of Judaea; and there he tarried with them, and baptized. And John also was baptizing in Aenon near to Salim, because there was much water there; and they came, and were baptized. For John was not yet cast into prison."[36]

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[32] *Luke*, 3.22; *Mark*, 1.11.
[33] *Matthew*, 3.17.
[34] *John*, 1.32, 34.
[35] *Mark*, 1.14.
[36] *John*, 3.22-24.

Whenever it commenced, *how long did Jesus' ministry last?* Just a few months, at the most a year, according to the first three Gospels – for they mention only one Passover. John, on the other hand, puts the duration close to three years – for he mentions three Passovers[37] before the final Passover leading to the crucifixion.[38]

From this discrepancy follow many others. John reports Jesus visiting and preaching in Jerusalem at least thrice.[39] The other three have Jesus visiting Jerusalem only once – in the last week of his sojourn on earth. As a consequence, John places that famous visit to the Jewish Temple – at which Jesus overturns the tables, and drives the money-lenders, and traders out – at a much earlier phase in Jesus' ministry than do the other three. But we must take both contradictory sequences to be simultaneously true for all the four Gospels "have God as their author"!

Either way, Jesus has been baptized by John. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus immediately leaves for the wilderness. Here he is tempted by the devil. The scenes are dramatic. The retorts that Jesus hurls at the devil, the ease with which he sees through the design of the devil – these have entered our vocabulary. In John, by sharp contrast, there is nothing about his being tempted by the devil.[40]

All right, Jesus has warded off the devil. He now gathers his disciples. *When and how does he gather these initial disciples?*

In Matthew and in Mark, having heard that John the Baptist has been thrown in prison, Jesus leaves for Galilee. One day as he is walking by the sea, he sees two fishermen, Simon

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[37]*John*, 2.13, 6.4.

[38]For the resulting uncertainties see, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Volume XIV, *Macropaedia*, p. 970; or the *Oxford Companion to the Bible*, Bruce M. Metzger, Michael D. Coogan, editors, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1993, pp. 358-59.

[39]*John*, 2.13-23; 6.4; and, of course, finally *John*, 11.55.

[40]Contrast, *Matthew*, 4.1-11; *Mark*, 1.12-13; *Luke*, 4.1-13; with *John*, 1.34-35.

and his brother Andrew, casting a net into the sea. "Follow me," he calls out to them, "and I will make you fishers of men." They straightway leave their nets, and follow him. Soon they chance upon James and his brother, John, mending their fishing nets. Jesus calls out to them. They too at once leave their boat, and join up with him.[41]

In Luke, Jesus has commenced his teaching, he has begun performing miracles too – for instance, he is pictured driving out a spirit from a man, he is pictured rebuking the fever which has gripped Simon's mother. One day he is standing by the lake. The people are all round asking him to teach them. He sees two ships standing by the lake, but the fishermen are out washing their nets. He enters one of the ships. It is Simon's. Jesus asks him to take the ship a bit into the lake. From there he addresses the people. The account continues:

> Now when he had left speaking, he said unto Simon, Launch out into the deep, and let down your nets for a draught.
> And Simon answering said unto him, Master, we have toiled all night, and have taken nothing: nevertheless at thy word I will let down the net.
> And when they had this done, they enclosed a great multitude of fishes: and their net brake.
> And they beckoned unto their partners, which were in the other ship, that they should come and help them. And they came, and filled both the ships, so that they began to sink.
> When Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord.
> For he was astonished, and all that were with him, at the draught of the fishes which they had taken:
> And so was also James, and John, the sons of Zebedee, which were partners with Simon. And Jesus said unto Simon, Fear not; from henceforth ye shall catch men.
> And when they had brought their ships to land, they forsook all, and followed him.[42]

[41] *Matthew*, 4.18-22; *Mark*, 1.16-20.
[42] *Luke*, 5.3-11.

What a contrast to the account in Matthew and Mark. And in John we have a third version of the recruitment, one that differs completely from the two we have encountered. John the Baptist has baptized Jesus. He – John – says that he has seen "the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it abode on him [Jesus]," he pronounces Jesus to be the Son of God. The next day, John is standing with two of his disciples. Jesus comes. "Behold the lamb of God," exclaims John. The Gospel continues:

> And the two disciples heard him [John] speak, and they followed Jesus.
> Then Jesus turned, and saw them following, and saith unto them, What seek ye? They said unto him, Rabbi, (which is to say, being interpreted, Master) where dwellest thou?
> He saith unto them, Come and see. They came and saw where he dwelt, and abode with him that day: for it was about the tenth hour.
> One of the two which heard John speak, and followed him, was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother.
> He first findeth his own brother Simon, and saith unto him, We have found the Messias, which is, being interpreted, the Christ.
> And he brought him to Jesus. And when Jesus beheld him, he said, Thou art Simon the son of Jona: thou shalt be called Cephas, which is by interpretation, A stone.
> The day following Jesus would go forth into Galilee, and findeth Philip, and saith unto him, Follow me.
> Philip findeth Nathanael, and saith unto him, We have found him, of whom Moses in the law, and the prophets did write, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph....[43]

Has either account anything to do with the other?

Jesus' miracles: Jesus has commenced his ministry. Miracles are an important component: he directly helps people through them, he advances them as proof of his being the Son of God, he invites people – including skeptics and opponents like the Pharisees and Sadducees – to believe in

[43] *John*, 1.37-51.

him, if not because of what he is saying then, at the least, because of the "works" he is doing, that is the miracles that take place through his hands and by his word. These miracles have also had a central position in the proselytizing campaigns of the Church. And that in at least two ways. The missionaries insist that our gods, for instance, are inferior, because they did not work these miracles – none of them rose after death, for instance, their publications and propaganda point out. Second, the Church and the missionaries inveigle the gullible into believing that, being the body, bride, agents of Jesus, they have a sort of fiduciary power to work some of the miracles. In publications like the *Catholic Dharma ka Pracharak,* as we have seen, priests are urged to seek out non-Christian families in which someone, specially a child, is gravely ill. They are instructed to try and convince the parents and the patient that by invoking Jesus they can have the child cured. "Our god is powerful," they are instructed to tell the parents. If they agree, the priest is instructed to perform the baptismal rites; if they do not, he is told to perform them either while the parents are out of hearing or sight, or on the pretext of administering some medicine....[44]

The miracles are an act of faith, in any case – in at least two senses. Ever so often Jesus himself tells the person who has suddenly got cured, "Your faith has cured you." On occasion, the Gospels themselves suggest that the miracle could be performed because the people believed, and that it could not be performed or Jesus did not work miracles in a particular place because the people of that place did not have the requisite faith. Believing the Gospel accounts of the miracles today is, in any case, a matter of faith: in the very nature of things, no proof can be offered that Jesus actually walked on water, that his touch or spittle actually cured a man of his

[44]For several telling instances and passages the reader can look up the Niyogi Committee Report, reprint, Voice of India, New Delhi, 1998; or my *Missionaries in India,* ASA, 1994.

congenital blindness.... At the least we may inquire how consistent the accounts of the miracles are in the different Gospels.

Several miracles which are set out in one Gospel are missing from others. Several of them are said in one Gospel to have been performed on a particular occasion, in a particular setting, and on completely different occasions and settings in the other Gospels.

A leper appeals to Jesus to cure him. Jesus touches him. "And immediately his leprosy was cleansed," we learn. Jesus tells the man, see that you tell no one, instead show yourself to the priest, and offer the gift that Moses had prescribed.[45] In Mark the man tells everyone.[46] In Matthew there is no indication that he tells anyone, or that the miracle gets known. In Luke, news of the miracle spreads, but it is not clear whether the man himself has mentioned it round.[47]

Jesus enters Capernaum. A centurion comes to him, and implores him to cure a servant of his who is sick with palsy. Elaborate exchanges take place between this representative of the Roman Empire and Jesus. Eventually Jesus cures him.[48] Luke also gives an extended description of this miracle. In that account, however, the centurion does *not* come to Jesus. Instead, he sends Jewish elders to Jesus to plead with him that he cure the man's servant. The centurion sends them consciously, deliberately:

> Now when he had ended all his sayings in the audience of the people, he entered into Capernaum.
> And a certain centurion's servant, who was dear to him, was sick, and ready to die.
> And when he heard of Jesus, *he sent unto him the elders of the Jews*, beseeching him that he would come and heal his servant.
> And when *they* came to Jesus, *they* besought him instantly, saying, That he was worthy for whom he should do this:

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[45] *Matthew*, 8.4.
[46] *Mark*, 1.45.
[47] *Luke*, 5.15.
[48] *Matthew*, 8.5-13.

> For he loveth our nation, and he hath built us a synagogue.
> Then Jesus went with them. And when he was now not far from the house, *the centurion sent friends to him,* saying unto him, Lord, trouble not thyself: for I am not worthy that thou shouldest enter my roof:
> Wherefore neither thought I myself worthy to come unto thee: but say in a word and my servant shall be healed....[49]

Simon Peter's mother-in-law is ill with fever. In Matthew, and also in Mark, Jesus touches her and the fever subsides.[50] In Luke, Jesus admonishes the fever, and it leaves the lady.[51]

Each of the three Synoptic Gospels reports Jesus exorcising spirits. Matthew speaks of *two men* possessed by devils.[52] Mark and Luke speak of many spirits having taken possession of *one man.*[53]

Jesus cures a man stricken by palsy. "And he entered into a ship, and passed over, and came into his own city," Matthew tells us. "And, behold, they brought him a man sick with palsy, lying on a bed: and Jesus seeing their faith said unto the sick with palsy; Son, be of good cheer: thy sins be forgiven thee ."[54] In Mark and Luke, the encounter is much more dramatic. "And again he entered into Capernaum, after some days," Mark reports, "and it was noised that he was in the house. And straightway many were gathered together, insomuch that there was no room to receive them, no, not so much as about the door: and he preached the word unto them. And they come unto him, bringing one sick with palsy, which was borne of four. *And when they could not come nigh unto him for the press, they uncovered the roof where he was: and when they had broken it up, they let down the bed wherein the sick of the palsy lay....*"[55]

Soon thereafter, a father rushes to Jesus, beseeches him to save his daughter, Jesus speaks to her, she rises. *What was the condition of the daughter before Jesus saw her?* According

[49] *Luke*, 7.1-10.
[50] *Matthew*, 8.15; *Mark*, 1.31.
[51] *Luke*, 4.39.
[52] *Matthew*, 8.28.
[53] *Mark*, 5.2-3; *Luke*, 8.27.
[54] *Matthew*, 9.1-2.
[55] *Mark*, 2.1-4; *Luke*, 5.18-19.

to Matthew, upon rushing to him, the father informs Jesus, *"My daughter is even now dead."* When Jesus reaches the house, he finds relatives and friends, mourning and making a noise. He tells them, "Give place, for the maid is not dead, but sleepeth." "And they laughed him to scorn," Matthew says.[56] According to Mark, she was at the point of death.[57] Luke reports that the little girl was dying when the father caught up with Jesus, that, while they were talking, someone came and told the father that she had in fact passed away.[58]

While Jesus is walking to the father's house, a woman who has had uncontrollable bleeding for twelve years sees him. She tells herself that if she can just touch his garment, she will be cured. So, as Jesus presses through the crowd, she touches the hem of his garment. In Matthew Jesus at once turns to her, blesses her, and she is healed: "But Jesus turned him about," Matthew says, "and when he saw her, he said, Daughter be of good comfort; thy faith hath made thee whole. And the woman was made whole from that hour."[59] In Mark, and in Luke too, the moment she touches the garment, she is healed. Jesus, on the other hand, is upset: "And Jesus, knowing in himself that virtue had gone out of him, turned him about in the press," Mark says, "and said, Who touched my clothes?" His disciples protest, "Thou seest the multitude thronging thee, and sayest thou, Who touched me?" "And he looked round about to see her that had done this thing. But the woman, fearing and trembling, knowing what was done in her, came and fell down before him, and told him all the truth. And he said unto her, Daughter, thy faith hath made thee whole; go in peace, and be whole of thy plague."[60]

Jesus has just fed a crowd of five thousand with just five loaves and two fish, and still there are baskets of food to spare. He asks his disciples to board the boat, and proceed to the other side of the lake. In Matthew, no motive is

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[56] *Matthew*, 9.18-19, 23-26.
[57] *Mark*, 5.23.
[58] *Luke*, 8.42, 49, 52-56.
[59] *Matthew*, 9.20-22.
[60] *Mark*, 5.25-34; *Luke*, 8.45-48.

mentioned for his asking the disciples to board the boat.[61] John, however, adds to the story an urgency and motive: Jesus asks the disciples to get into the boat and row to the other side of the lake because he apprehends that, having seen the miracle, the multitude will proclaim him king.[62] Even more significant is an incident that happens *en route*.

Having told the disciples to proceed, Jesus retreats into a mountain to pray. By the time he returns, the boat has left. Soon, he walks over water towards it. Seeing an apparition treading water, the disciples are startled. It is a spirit, they fear. Jesus calls out to them, and reassures them that it is he. At this point, in Matthew a telling incident occurs. Peter calls out to him, and says, "Lord, if it be thou, bid me come unto thee on water." Jesus answers, "Come". "And when Peter was come down out of the ship, he walked on the water, to go to Jesus," Matthew says. "But when he saw the wind boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink, he cried, saying, Lord save me. And immediately Jesus stretched forth his hand, and caught him, and said unto him, O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt? And when they were come into the ship, the wind ceased ."[63] A vital incident, not only in regard to Jesus, and of course Peter, but even more so because of the significance it has for the teaching. It does not figure in Mark. It does not figure in John. And as far as Luke is concerned, the entire business of Jesus walking on water does not find a mention!

Jesus has fed a multitude again: this time he has fed four thousand from just seven loaves of bread, and a few small fish. Not only has everyone eaten his fill, seven baskets of food are left over. He enters a ship with his disciples, and they leave for the other side of the lake. They alight. "And the Pharisees came forth," Mark tells us, "and began to question with him, seeking from him a sign from heaven, tempting him."[64] Matthew would have us believe that along with the

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[61] *Matthew*, 14.22.
[62] *John*, 6.15.
[63] *Matthew*, 14.22-32.
[64] *Mark*, 8.11.

Pharisees were some Sadducees: "The Pharisees also with the Sadducees came, and tempting desired him that he would show them a sign from heaven."[65]

How does Jesus react to the demand? "And he sighed deeply in his spirit," Mark says, "and saith, Why doth this generation seek after a sign? Verily I say unto you, There shall no sign be given unto this generation." And that seems to be the end of the exchange on this occasion, for Mark reports, "And he left them, and entering into the ship again departed to the other side."[66] In Matthew, on the other hand, the exchange was more extensive, for he reports,

> He answered and said unto them, When it is evening, ye say, It will be fair weather: for the sky is red.
> And in the morning, It will be foul weather today: for the sky is red and lowering. O, ye hypocrites, ye can discern the face of the sky; but can ye not discern the signs of the times?
> A wicked and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign....

In Mark, as we have seen, Jesus has told them that "There shall no sign be given unto this generation." In Matthew, Jesus' refusal is not absolute, indeed Jesus makes an all-important exception, one dealing with his eventual death, his being entombed for three days, and his resurrection: having pronounced them hypocrites, and a wicked and adulterous generation, he says, "and there shall be no sign given unto it, *but the sign of the prophet Jonas*."[67]

Jesus warns his disciples against the doctrines of the Pharisees and Sadducees. They reach the coast of Caesarea Philippi. Jesus asks his disciples, Who do men say I am? They answer that men think of him in different ways: some say that he is John the Baptist, some that he is the prophet Elias, some that he is Jeremias. But who do *you* say I am?, Jesus asks. An exchange follows which is of vital importance for the Church:

> And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

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[65]*Matthew*, 16.1. [66]*Mark*, 8.11-13. [67]*Matthew*, 16.2-4.

> And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven.
> And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.
> And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed on earth....[68]

The incident figures in Mark, and also in Luke. But this all-important exchange – one from which springs the claims of the Catholic Church of Rome to authority, one from which springs the myth of Peter having the keys to heaven, is missing![69]

Next, Jesus restores sight to the blind. According to Matthew and Mark, this happens as Jesus and his disciples *leave* Jericho. According to Luke, it happens as they *approach* Jericho. According to Matthew, there are *two blind men*. According to Mark and Luke, there is *one blind man*. According to Matthew, Jesus restores sight by touching the eyes of the blind men. According to Mark and Luke, he does so merely by speaking to them, "Go thy way, thy faith hath made thee whole."[70]

Each of the three Synoptic Gospels narrates how Jesus rid a possessed child of the devil that had taken possession of him. But again, the narratives differ in significant ways: all-important exchanges which are in one are missing from others, in those exchanges, all-important observations of Jesus which are in one Gospel, observations that form almost the moral of the miracle in one Gospel are completely absent from the others.

Jesus is surrounded by a multitude. A helpless father falls on his knees, and implores Jesus to cure his son. He is a

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[68] *Matthew*, 16.16-19.
[69] *c.f.: Mark*, 8.27-30; *Luke*, 9.18-21.
[70] Compare, *Matthew*, 20.29-34; *Mark*, 10.46-52; *Luke*, 18.35-43.

lunatic, the father says, he is sorely vexed. Often he falls into fire, often into water. I brought him to your disciples, the father tells Jesus, but they could not cure him. Jesus is moved as well as vexed. He says, "O faithless and perverse generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I suffer you? Bring him hither unto me."

The child is brought. Jesus rebukes the devil. The devil departs. The child is cured.

In Mark, the cure is preceded by an exchange between the father and Jesus, an exchange oft-cited to stress the importance of reposing faith:

> And he asked his father, How long is it ago since this came into him? And he said, Of a child.
>
> And oft times it hath cast him into the fire, and into the waters, to destroy him: but if thou canst do anything, have compassion on us, and help us.
>
> Jesus said unto him, If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth.
>
> And straightway the father of the child cried out, and said with tears, Lord, I believe; help thou my unbelief.[71]

The exchange is missing from Matthew, as it is from Luke.

In Matthew and in Luke, Jesus having rebuked him, the devil at once leaves the child alone. And the child is cured. Not so immediately in Mark. In the latter, Jesus commands the spirit, "Thou dumb and deaf spirit, I charge thee, come out of him, and enter no more into him." The spirit cries out, he tears at the child...., and only thereafter departs. The child "was as one dead," reports Mark, "insomuch that many said, He is dead." "But Jesus took him by the hand, and lifted him up; and he arose."[72]

In Luke, the child having been cured, everyone is amazed at "the mighty power of God," and the incident is closed. But both Mark and Matthew advance an additional and important

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[71]*Mark*, 9.21-24. [72]*Mark*, 9.25-27.

instruction: Jesus discloses to the disciples that the particular kind of spirit which had taken possession of the child yields only to prayer and fasting.

Furthermore, Matthew has Jesus address a significant admonition to the disciples, one that once again bears upon the importance of faith. When they are alone with him, Matthew reports, the disciples ask Jesus in private, "Why could we not cast him out?" And Jesus says,

> Because of your unbelief: for verily I say unto you, If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you....

That is missing altogether from Mark as well as from Luke.[73]

Soon an argument breaks out among the disciples. What is the dispute about? How does Jesus come into the picture? What does Jesus say? Each of the Synoptic Gospels reports the incident, but on detail after detail each differs from the others.

Matthew would have us believe that the discussion was about "who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" – that is, it was about the meritorious in general, not about any *inter se* ranking among themselves. Both Mark and Luke narrate, on the other hand, that the argument was about who *among them* was the greatest.

In Matthew, the disciples *themselves pose the question* to Jesus. In Mark, having reached the house in Capernaum, *Jesus asks them*, "What was it that ye disputed among yourselves by the way?" "But they held their peace," says Mark, "for by the way they had disputed among themselves, who should be the greatest." In Luke Jesus comes into the exchange in yet another way: "Then there arose a reasoning among them, which of them should be greatest. And Jesus, *perceiving the thought of their heart*, took a child, and set him by him...."

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[73]Compare, *Matthew*, 17.14-21; *Mark*, 9.17-29; *Luke*, 9.38-43.

What Jesus says in elaboration is significantly different from Gospel to Gospel....[74]

Incidents follow incidents. If we go by Matthew, the mother of James and John comes to Jesus, and says, "Grant that these my two sons may sit, the one on thy right hand, and the other on the left, in thy kingdom." Jesus tells her that she knows not what she is asking for, that she knows not the sufferings that those who accompany him shall have to endure, that, in any case, the privilege of sitting on his left and right is not his to confer but that of God. But according to Mark, the exchange takes place not between Jesus and the mother of James and John, it takes place between the two brothers and Jesus, the mother is not on the scene at all. The incident is missing altogether from Luke, and also from John....[75]

Jesus is not long into his ministry. Luke narrates a famous and moving story relating to this period. Jesus is at the house of a Pharisee for dinner. A woman, who was a sinner, comes. She has brought an alabaster box filled with a precious ointment. The woman comes in, Luke continues, "And stood at his feet behind him weeping, and began to wash his feet with tears, and did wipe them with the hairs of her head, and kissed his feet, and anointed them with the ointment."

The Pharisee sees this, and thinks, "This man, if he were a prophet, would have known who and what manner of woman this is that toucheth him: for she is a sinner." Jesus discerns the thoughts passing through his mind. And he asks Simon, the Pharisee: if one debtor owes a man five hundred pence and another owes him fifty, and both are unable to repay the amounts, and the man forgives them both, which of the two is liable to love the creditor more? "I suppose," Simon answers, "that he, to whom he forgave most." "Thou hast rightly judged," Jesus says, and explains,

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[74]Compare, *Matthew*, 18; *Mark*, 9.33-50; *Luke*, 9.46-48.

[75]Compare *Matthew*, 20.20-28; *Mark*, 10.35-45.

> Seest thou this woman? I entered into thine house, thou gavest me no water for my feet: but she hath washed my feet with tears, and wiped them with the hairs of her head.
> Thou gavest me no kiss: but this woman since the time I came hath not ceased to kiss my feet.
> My head with oil thou didst not anoint: but this woman hath anointed my feet with ointment.
> Wherefore I say unto thee, Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much: but to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little.

Turning to the woman, Jesus tells her, "Thy sins are forgiven.... Thy faith hath saved thee; go in peace."[76]

In Matthew, Mark and John also we get the incident of a woman coming with an alabaster box filled with ointment, and anointing Jesus. But in every other particular the accounts differ radically from that in Luke.

The incident occurs in the very last days of Jesus. Just two days are left for the Passover feast. Jesus is in the house of Simon whom Matthew identifies as "the leper" rather than as the Pharisee. The woman comes. She pours the ointment on Jesus' head – not his feet, as in Luke. The disciples are indignant. To what purpose is this waste?, they say, "for this ointment might have been sold for much; and given to the poor." Jesus teaches them, and in the process once again forecasts the dramatic events that are about to unfold:

> Why trouble ye the woman? For she hath wrought a good work upon me.
> 'For ye have the poor always with you; but me ye have not always.
> For in that she hath poured this ointment on my body, she did it for my burial.

And he tells them that for this good deed, "Wheresoever this Gospel shall be preached in the whole world, there shall also this, that this woman hath done, be told for a memorial of

[76] *Luke*, 7.36-50.

her."[77] The woman is not a sinner. The moral is not about who had loved Jesus more, nor about who, being in greater need of exculpation, is the one to whom the Lord shall rush His benediction.

John's version differs from both, having as it does elements from each of the two! The Passover feast is six days hence. Jesus is in Bethany, from where he will soon proceed on the final, fateful journey to Jerusalem. He is at the house not of some Pharisee, not of some leper, but of Lazarus – whom he has raised from the dead. Lazarus' sisters, Mary and Martha, who had got Jesus to come over to resurrect their brother are attending on him. No woman comes from outside. There is no alabaster box. Mary takes "a pound of ointment of spikenard, very costly." She anoints the feet of Jesus – she does not pour it over his head; she wipes his feet with her hair.

Not the disciples in general as in Matthew and Mark, but one disciple – Judas Iscariot, who will soon betray him – exclaims, "Why was not this ointment sold for three hundred pence, and given to the poor?" John adds an editorial comment: "This he said, not that he cared for the poor; but because he was a thief, and had the bag, and bare what was put therein." "Let her alone", Jesus remarks, "against the day of my burying hath she kept this. For the poor always ye have with you; but me ye have not always." There is nothing about his having directed that the deed must be remembered wheresoever the Gospel is taught .[78]

Quite a bundle of irreconcilables, and the foregoing is just a sample. And, as we shall see, they are nothing compared to what happens when we get to the climax – the final week, and the decisive events to which the Gospels devote the largest proportion of their text.

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[77] *Matthew*, 26.6-13; *Mark*, 14.3-9 similar.

[78] *John*, 12.1-8.

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The uncertain build-up to the climax

The time has come. Jesus is on what will be his final journey. His final days on earth. He is nearing Jerusalem. According to John, Jesus finds a donkey, and rides into the city on it.[1] According to Mark and Luke, as the group approaches Jerusalem, Jesus asks two of his disciples to go ahead into the village, he tells them that they will see a colt tied there, that no man has yet sat on it, that they should unfasten it, and bring it to him. They do so, and Jesus rides into the city on it.[2] According to Matthew also Jesus sends two disciples, but he asks them to fetch not the colt, but both – the ass and its colt. And there was a reason for his doing so, Matthew explains: "All this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying, Tell ye the daughter of Sion, Behold, thy King cometh unto thee, meek, and sitting upon an ass, and a colt the foal of an ass." The disciples go, "And brought the ass, and the colt, and put on them their clothes, and they set him thereon."[3] Did Jesus ride into Jerusalem on the donkey, on its colt, or on both simultaneously?

Either way, Jesus enters Jerusalem. To a triumphant welcome by the populace. In Matthew and Luke, he goes straight to the Temple, and cleanses it – so directly does Jesus proceed to the Temple that the walk to the Temple is telescoped into the account of the entry into Jerusalem.[4] In Mark, Jesus goes to the Temple all right, he looks at the

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[1] *John*, 12.14-16.
[2] *Mark*, 11.1-7; *Luke*, 19.28-34.
[3] *Matthew*, 21.1-7.
[4] *Matthew*, 21.12-17; *Luke*, 19.45-46.

goings-on, but, as it is late, with his twelve disciples, he leaves for Bethany. It is on the next day that he returns to the Temple, overturns the tables, drives out the money-lenders, sellers of doves and the like.[5] In John, the entire episode of the Temple has occurred much earlier – at the very commencement of Jesus' public activity, and not, as in the other three Gospels, at the very end of it! So, while Jesus enters Jerusalem, and the subsequent events which we will follow transpire, there is no cleansing of the Temple, etc., in these final days.[6]

Discrepancies continue to dog every subsequent step in the accounts. We pick up the narrative from the event which is so central to Christian lore – Jesus' last meal with his disciples. It has been the subject of innumerable paintings. It is the theme of innumerable dramatizations. So many decisive things happen during it – Jesus tells his disciples that he will not be long with them, he foretells the betrayal by Judas, and so on. Some of the rituals central to Church services derive from this meal – for instance, that of eating that white flake as the body of Jesus, and drinking that sip of wine as the blood of Jesus. So, this last meal is as central to the Church as anything. What do the Gospels tell us about it?

In the first three Gospels, the meal is the Passover meal itself.[7] In John there is no celebration of the Passover Meal at all in this round, as by the day of the Passover events have moved ahead towards their inexorable climax. The meal in John is on the day before the Passover Festival.[8] "Each of these datings may be theologically motivated," says the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* – protagonists choose one description rather than the other depending on "whether it be that the Eucharist is to be represented as the Passover meal (Synoptics) [that is, the first three Gospels] or whether Jesus

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[5]*Mark*, 11.11-12, 15-16.
[6]*John*, 2.13-17; 12.12 onwards.
[7]*Matthew*, 26.17-25; *Mark*, 14.12-21; *Luke*, 22.7-26.
[8]*John*, 13.1.

himself is to be shown as the true Passover lamb, who died at the hour when the lambs were slaughtered...."[9]

Each of the Gospels contains elaborate accounts of what was said at the meal – mainly by Jesus. The discrepancies are so considerable, and their "theological" implications so telling that scholars despair of being able to get at what actually happened. Summarising the result of sifting over centuries, *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* states, "The exact words Jesus spoke over the bread and cup are impossible to recover, since the various accounts of the institution (1 *Cor.* 11.23-25; *Mark* 14.22-24; *Matt.* 26.26-18; *Luke* 22.19-20) have been coloured by liturgical developments in the post-Easter community...."[10] "Jesus had celebrated a last meal with his disciples before his arrest, but what was said during that meal eludes our knowledge," Koester concludes. "Everything that the relevant texts report about it derives from the interests of the Christian cult and has been formulated according to later interpretations of Jesus' death on the cross.... whether Jesus expected a visible demonstration of God's rule in the near future as a result of his path to the cross, whether some of his disciples (especially Judas?) tried to force this event, whether Jesus himself thought that the hour for a decisive action had come (is the entry into Jerusalem at all a historical event?) – all these are questions which merely invite speculation. Neither the historian nor the theologian should try to answer these questions."[11]

Take up any event and see what we learn about it in accounts of this meal – say the one dramatized no end, the betrayal by Judas. All the four Gospels report that two days

[9] *Encyclopaedia Britannica, Macropaedia,* Volume XXII, p. 345.

[10] *The Oxford Companion to the Bible,* Bruce M. Metzger, Michael D. Coogan, editors, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1993, p. 359.

[11] Helmut Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament,* Volume II, *History and Literature of Early Christianity,* de Gruyter, Berlin and New York, 1982, p. 84.

before that final meal the chief priests and elders decide to arrest Jesus secretly and to have him put to death. According to Matthew, Judas then goes to the chief priests and asks, "What will you give me if I betray Jesus to you?" They count out 30 silver coins and give these to him. From then on Judas is looking for a chance to hand Jesus over to them.[12] According to Mark and Luke no money is paid at this stage: Judas goes to them, offers to deliver Jesus, they are pleased, "and promised to give him money."[13] In John also we are told of the chief priests hatching the plot, but there is no mention of Judas going to them.[14]

Jesus is said to have foretold Judas' betrayal at this meal. According to *Matthew*, when they are eating Jesus says, "Verily I say unto you that one of you will betray me." The disciples are agitated, each begins asking Jesus, "Is it I?" When Judas asks, "Master, is it I?," Jesus answers elliptically, "Thou hast said."[15] According to Mark, Jesus says that one of those who is eating with him will betray him. Questioned by the agitated disciples, he repeats the prophecy, "It will be one of you twelve, one who dips his bread in the dish with me...." But there is no additional exchange with Judas.[16] In Luke the sequence is more or less the same as in Mark – there is no specific hint about Judas, nor is there any additional exchange with him.

According to John, on the other hand, Jesus was as specific as anyone can be. The supper has ended, the devil has planted the idea of betraying Jesus into the heart of Judas Iscariot. Jesus begins to wash the feet of his disciples. He alludes to what lurks: ".... All of you are clean," he says, "all except one". And yet again: "I speak not of you all: I know whom I have chosen: but that the scripture may be fulfilled, He that eateth bread with me hath lifted up his heel against me. Now I tell you before it come, that, when it come to pass,

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[12]*Matthew*, 26.14-16. [13]*Mark*, 14.10-11; *Luke*, 22.3-6.
[14]*John*, 11.45-57. [15]*Matthew*, 26.20-25. [16]*Mark*, 14.17-21.

ye may believe that I am he...." Jesus is thereafter troubled in spirit, and continues, "Verily, verily I say unto you, that one of you shall betray me." A disciple goads another to ask Jesus who shall do so. Jesus answers, "He it is to whom I shall give a sop when I have dipped it." He dips the bread in wine and gives it directly to Judas Iscariot. "And after the sop Satan entered into him" – that is, into Judas. Jesus tells him, "That thou doest, do quickly." Even then the other disciples do not understand what Jesus is saying – but Judas does: for John tells us, "He then, having received the sop went immediately out: and it was night...."[17] Incidentally, in Matthew's Gospel that admonition, for Judas to do quickly what he is going to do, occurs not at this stage – it occurs later, in Gethsemane when Judas, having led the guards to Jesus, goes up to identify him, says, "Peace be with you, Teacher," and kisses him.[18]

The supper over, Jesus and eleven of his companions – all except Judas, that is – go to the garden, Gethsemane to pray. As Jesus retires to a corner to pray, he asks three of them to stay awake and keep watch. In both Matthew and Mark, Jesus finds them asleep thrice. In Luke once.[19] In all these three Gospels, though saying that God's will alone must prevail, Jesus implores God, "If you will, take this cup of suffering from me." In Luke – but not in the other two – an angel comes to strengthen him.[20]

Soon they come to arrest him, accompanied by Judas. *Who come?* In Matthew and Mark they are "a large crowd armed with swords and clubs and sent by the chief priests and elders."[21] In Luke, however, "the chief priests and the officers of the temple guard and the elders" themselves come to seize him.[22] In John, the ones who come are the temple

[17] *John*, 13.2; 13.10-11;13.18-27.
[18] *Matthew*, 26.49-50.
[19] *Luke*, 22.45.
[20] *Luke*, 22.43.
[21] *Matthew*, 26.47; *Mark*, 14.43 similar.
[22] *Luke*, 22.52.

guards who have been sent by the chief priests and elders, but in addition there are also Roman soldiers.[23]

Whoever have come, have reached. What happens next? All four Gospels report that one of Jesus' disciples – Peter – takes a sword and hacks off an ear of one of the fellows. In Matthew, Jesus says, "Put your sword back in place. All who take the sword will die by the sword. Don't you know that I could call on my Father for help, and at once He would send me more than twelve armies of angels? But, in that case, how could the scriptures come true which say that this is what must happen?"[24] In Mark, the disciple hacks off the ear all right, but there is no report of Jesus saying anything to the disciple.[25] In Luke, on the third hand, Jesus exclaims, "Enough of this!," and touches the man's ear and thereby heals him.[26] In John there is no touching and therefore no healing, and what Jesus says is something quite different: Jesus says to Peter, "Put up thy sword into the sheath: the cup which my Father hath given me, shall I not drink it?"[27]

In the three earlier Gospels, Judas leads the guards, etc., to Jesus, he identifies Jesus by kissing him. In John, on the other hand, Jesus, "knowing all things that should come upon him," asks them who they have come to get, and upon their saying that they have come to get Jesus of Nazareth, he himself – not once, but twice – declares that he is that Jesus. There is no occasion nor need for Judas to identify him.[28]

Whoever they are, Judas leads the men to the garden. In Mark, Matthew and Luke, they lay their hands on Jesus and take him.[29] In John, on the other hand, when Jesus identifies himself to them himself, something altogether different happens. Those who have come to seize him, are startled, they fall to the ground: "As soon then as he had said unto

[23] *John*, 18.3. [24] *Matthew*, 26.51-54.
[25] *Mark*, 14.47. [26] *Luke*, 22.51.
[27] *John*, 18.11. [28] *John*, 18.4-9.
[29] *Matthew*, 26.47-57; *Mark*, 14.44-53; *Luke*, 22.47-54.

them, I am he," John records, "they went backward, and fell to the ground."[30]

Shifting the blame

One way or another, with rudeness or veneration, Jesus is arrested. As we move from the account of what follows from one Gospel to the next, the guilt of the Roman governor is minimized, and that of the Jews is progressively increased – a change that parallels to the dot what was happening in real life in the century and a half following the death of Jesus: that is, the sharpening conflict between the Jewish church and the new Christian sect.

The account in Matthew and Mark is similar. Jesus is taken to the house of Caiaphas, the High Priest, where teachers of law and elders have already gathered. He is questioned, and the next morning, chained, he is taken to the house of the Roman governor.[31] In Luke the questioning takes place the subsequent morning. But in substance the account is similar.[32] In John, on the other hand, Jesus is taken not to the house of Caiaphas but to that of his father-in-law, Annas. He is questioned there. And after that Annas sends him to Caiaphas.[33] While in Mark and Matthew, and even in Luke, though in this Gospel the transfer takes place a day later, it is the Jewish council which convicts Jesus, in John that council is nowhere in the picture – Annas and Caiaphas dispose of Jesus individually on their own.

Whichever the place, attempts are made to implicate Jesus in some crime which would entail the death penalty. He is accused of claiming to have the power to bring down the Temple, and rebuild it in three days. He is accused of blasphemy – because of his claiming to be the Son of God. In

[30] *John*, 18.6.
[31] *Matthew*, 26.57-68, 27.1-2; *Mark*, 14.53-65.
[32] *Luke*, 22.54-55, 66-71; 23.1.
[33] *John*, 18.12-14, 19-24.

all, except John – in which there is no information about the questions Jesus is asked by the Jewish authorities.

Jesus is now before Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor. In the earliest Gospel, that of Mark, Pilate is in cahoots with the crowd. He knows that the priests want Jesus out of the way because of jealousy. He asks him some perfunctory questions. Jesus does not defend himself against the calumners. Pilate asks the crowd whom they want him to free – Barabbas (who was guilty of sedition and murder) or Jesus: it is the Passover Festival, and it was the custom for the Roman governor to set one man free in accordance with the wishes of the subjects. The crowd screams that Jesus be crucified, and Barabbas freed. "Pilate wanted to please the crowd," Mark says, "so he set Barabbas free for them. Then he had Jesus whipped and handed him over to be crucified."[34]

Matthew follows the account of Mark – but the balance begins to shift. We now learn that when Pilate asks the crowd whom he should free, the chief priests and elders instigate the crowd to shout that Barabbas be freed and Jesus be crucified. At this point Pilate's wife sends him word, "Have nothing to do with that innocent man, because in a dream last night I suffered much on account of him." Even after it has shouted for Jesus' crucifixion, Pilate asks the crowd, "What crime has he committed?" They shout all the more, "Crucify him, crucify him."

"When Pilate saw that he could prevail nothing," says Matthew, "but that rather a tumult was made, he took water, and washed his hands before the multitude saying, 'I am innocent of the blood of this just person: see ye to it.' Then answered all the people, and said, 'His blood be on us, and on our children.'" Pilate releases Barabbas, and sends Jesus to be crucified. And those sentences imputed to the crowd

[34] *Mark*, 15.1-15.

become the justification down the ages for the persecution of Jews.[35]

Luke adds a few more twists to exculpate the Romans, and intensify the guilt of the Jews. In this Gospel, the Jewish establishment hurls many additional charges against Jesus: that he has been misleading our people, that he has been exhorting them not to pay taxes to the Emperor, that he has been claiming to be Messiah, a King. Pilate asks Jesus, "Are you king of the Jews ?" Jesus gives the enigmatic answer, "So you say."

Pilate declares, "I find no reason to condemn this man." The priests redouble their insistence, "With his teaching he is starting a riot among the people all through Judaea. He began in Galilee and now he has come here." Learning that Jesus is from Galilee, Pilate sends him off to Herod who rules over that part. Herod asks questions. The priests hurl accusations. Herod too concludes that Jesus is not guilty. He puts a fine robe on him, and reverts him back to Pilate.

Pilate now tells the crowd and the priests, "Ye have brought this man unto me, as one that perverteth the people: and behold, I, having examined him before you, have found no fault in this man touching those things whereof ye accuse him: No, nor yet Herod: for I sent you to him; and, lo, nothing worthy of death is done unto him. I will therefore chastise him, and release him." The crowd shouts all the more, Kill him, set Barabbas free. Pilate appeals to them a third time, "Why, what evil hath he done? I have found no cause of death in him: I will therefore chastise him, and let him go." The crowd and the priests shout for crucifixion yet again. Pilate gives in, "And Pilate gave sentence that it should be as they required."[36]

In John also after the questioning at Caiaphas' place, the Jewish authorities take Jesus to the judgment hall of Pilate, but they stay outside, "lest they should be defiled" for the

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[35] *Matthew*, 27.11-26.

[36] *Luke*, 23.3-5, 13-25.

Passover Feast. What wrong has he done?, Pilate asks them. "If he were not a malefactor, we would not have delivered him unto thee," they answer. In that case, Pilate says, "take ye him, and judge him according to your law." The Jews say there is a problem, "It is not lawful for us to put any man to death." Pilate then goes into the judgment hall again, and begins to question Jesus.

The exchanges are very different from the ones reported in the other Gospels. In any event, Pilate goes out and tells the Jewish authorities, "I find in him no fault at all." But there is the custom that I am to release a man you name for Passover, he says, do you therefore want that I release to you this King of the Jews? No, Barabbas, they say. "Now Barabbas was a robber," John reports – others, as we saw, say he was guilty of sedition and murder. "Then Pilate therefore took Jesus, and scourged him," John says.[37] And the last journey to Golgotha commences....

The discrepancies between the Gospels apart, it is now widely acknowledged that the descriptions of Jesus' trial and conviction just cannot be squared with what is known for certain about Jewish legal procedure. It is only in Luke that the charges are listed with any specificity on account of which the Jewish council convicted Jesus: none of these carried a capital sentence under Jewish law. Indeed, there are many reasons to infer that Luke is suggesting that the Jewish authorities held Jesus to be *not* guilty of blasphemy.[38]

"The historical reliability of this account [of the Jewish authorities convicting Jesus] has rightly been questioned," the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* concludes. The narratives in the four Gospels contradict each other, for one, it says. Moreover, "the question arises what earwitness can be supposed later to have given the disciples an exact report" of what transpired in the Jewish council. Furthermore, the

[37] *John*, 18.28-40.
[38] cf., A.E. Harvey, *Jesus and the Constraints of History*, The Bampton Lectures 1980, Duckworth, 1982, Appendix 1, pp. 174-75.

Encyclopaedia points out, "trials of this kind were not to be conducted during the period of the festival." "The strongest argument against the Synoptic presentation is, however, that it is styled throughout in a Christian, and not in a Jewish way," the *Encyclopaedia* notes, "that is, on the basis of scriptural proof and the Christian confession to the messiahship and divine Sonship of Jesus. The High Priest's question, 'Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?' (*Mark* 14:61), is unthinkable from the viewpoint of Jewish premises, because Son of God was not a Jewish title for the Messiah. Thus, the account reflects the controversies of the later church with the Judaism of its day...."[39]

There are disputes also about the jurisdictional competence of the Jewish council, the *Encyclopaedia* observes. Some maintain that the Jewish council did in fact have the authority to sentence a man to death for blasphemy, and so there would have been no reason to take Jesus to the Roman governor. Recall that in John, when they reach Pilate's palace with Jesus, Pilate asks the Jewish authorities, "What accusation bring ye against this man?" They do not give a specific answer: "They answered and said unto him," John tells us, "If he were not a malefactor, we would not have delivered him up unto thee." "Then said Pilate unto them, Take ye him, and judge him according to your law." Now see what the Jews tell Pilate: "The Jews therefore said unto him, It is not lawful for us to put any man to death."[40] In regard to this statement about the powers of the Jewish council, *The Cambridge Companion to the Bible* observes,

> John 18:31 quotes the Jewish authorities as declaring that they could not put anyone to death, but prior to the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE, the Jewish council (*synedrion*) did have the right to execute those Jews who violated Jewish law, although they needed the prior approval of the Roman authorities to do so. On the other hand, those whose misdeeds were seen as threats to the public order had to be turned

[39] *Encyclopaedia Britannica, Macropaedia*, Volume XXII, p. 344.
[40] *John*, 18. 29-31.

over to the Roman authorities for judgment and appropriate action. A decision by the Jewish council leading to the death of the offender is described in *Acts* 5:27-40. Further, early rabbinic sources report executions carried out by authority of the Jewish council according to their laws.[41]

And all this from scholars who believe that Jesus was in fact arrested as a trouble-maker, informally interrogated, and handed over to the Roman governor as one leading a political revolt against the Empire....

Out to kill Jesus from the outset

By the time we reach the Gospel of John hostilities of the nascent Church with the Jewish establishment have reached such a pitch that the latter gets blamed not just for being responsible for the ultimate killing of Jesus, the Gospel makes out that they were out to get Jesus from the very commencement of his ministry. Indeed, this hostility of the Jews, their attempts and plans to kill Jesus become a refrain that runs through John.

Jesus has reached Jerusalem again – it is his second visit: in the other three Gospels, as will be recalled, Jesus comes to Jerusalem only once, for the final dramatic consummation; in John, he visits it at least twice on earlier occasions also. There is a pool at the market. An angel is said to come and stir the water once in a while. Whoever is the first to enter the pool gets cured of whatever ailment he has. An infirm man has been coming there repeatedly. But there is always such a rush that he is never able to be the first to enter the pool after it has been stirred. He appeals to Jesus. "Rise, take up thy bed, and walk," Jesus tells him. "And immediately the man was made whole," John informs us, "and took up his bed, and walked: and on the same day was the Sabbath."

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[41]H.C. Kee, E.M. Meyers, John Rogerson, A.J. Saldarini, *The Cambridge Companion to the Bible,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997, p. 546.

The Jews are upset: as men are being cured by the mere word of this outsider, who will flock to them and their places? They use the pretext of Jesus having worked – a miracle though it be – on a Sabbath. "And therefore", the Gospel records, "did the Jews persecute Jesus, and sought to slay him...." Questioned, Jesus answers, "My Father worketh hitherto, and I work." That enrages the Jews even more, John would have us believe: "Therefore the Jews sought the more to kill him, because he had not only broken the Sabbath, but said also that God was his Father, making himself equal with God."[42]

Because of confrontations of this kind, Jesus is said to leave for Galilee, "for he would not walk in Jewry [Judaea], because the Jews sought to kill him."[43] Soon, the Jewish feast of the tabernacles is at hand. Jesus' disciples urge him to go for the feast: the one who seeks to be known openly cannot remain doing things in secret, they tell him. No, he says, my time is not yet come, you proceed. But eventually he too goes, "not openly, but as it were in secret." The Jews seek him out. "Where is he?", they demand. People keep the information from them....[44] The Jewish authorities see and hear the adulation in which the people are coming to hold Jesus, "and the Pharisees and Chief Priests sent officers to take him."[45]

The Gospel has Jesus himself declare, and to the Jewish authorities themselves that they are out to kill him, and that they are determined to do so because they have been fathered by the devil: "I know that ye are Abraham's seed," Jesus tells them, "but ye seek to kill me, because my word has no place in you.... If ye were Abraham's children, ye would do the works of Abraham. But now ye seek to kill me, a man that hath told you the truth, which I have heard of God:

[42]*John*, 5.16-18. [43]*John*, 7.1. [44]*John*, 7.1-13.
[45]*John*, 7.32; *John*, 12.19 for the similar reaction of the Jewish authorities at his subsequent visit to Jerusalem.

this did not Abraham.... If God were your Father, ye would love me: for I proceeded forth and came from God; neither came I myself, but He sent me.... Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own; for he is liar, and the father of it..."[46]

The heated exchanges continue. Soon, the Gospel would have us believe, the Jews take up stones to cast at Jesus. Jesus escapes by hiding himself.[47]

A man who has been blind since birth comes to Jesus. Jesus spits onto some clay, and puts the clay over the eyes of the man. The Jews are incensed when they hear of the miracle. They cross-examine the man, then they cross-examine his parents. The parents evade the question of who has restored his sight and how. "These words spake his parents," John tells us, "because they feared the Jews: for the Jews had agreed already, that if any man did confess that he was Christ, he should be put out of the synagogue."[48]

No time has elapsed, and the Jews are again pictured as taking up stones to stone Jesus – this time the provocation is that he has referred to himself and God as one. Jesus remonstrates with them: I have done so many good works, he tells them. We do not stone you for the good works, but for the blasphemy you utter, they answer. But why don't you see that I am able to do these works because I am in God and He is in me?, Jesus asks. "Therefore they sought again to take him: but he escaped out of their hand...."[49]

At last, their plot has ripened. Thus far the Gospel has given a diverse set of motives which have impelled the Jews to get at Jesus: he has broken the code – in regard to the Sabbath, for instance; the people are turning to him; he utters

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[46]*John*, 8.37-44.
[47]*John*, 8.57-59.
[48]*John*, 9.1-22.
[49]*John*, 10.30-33, 36-39.

blasphemies – equating himself to God. Jesus' plain-speaking too incenses them. John now suggests another, one may say higher or more conclusive motive which impels the Jews to have Jesus killed:

> Then gathered the chief priests and the Pharisees a council, and said, What do we? for this man doeth many miracles.
> *If we let him thus alone, all men will believe on him: and the Romans shall come and take away both our place and nation.*

Caiaphas, who is the High Priest at the time, provides the ultimate rationalization:

> Ye know nothing at all, nor consider that it is expedient for us that *one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not.*

John elevates the matter even higher. The Gospel comments, "And this spake he not of himself: but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus should die for that nation; And not for that nation only, but that also he should gather together in one the children of God that were scattered abroad."

"Then from that day forth they took counsel together for to put him to death," concludes John.[50] They issue a command that anyone who knows the whereabouts of Jesus should disclose them so that they may take him.[51]

Event follows event. They catch Jesus. They try him in a sort of kangaroo-court. And then they take him to Pilate. The Jews first charge Jesus with blasphemy. As this makes Pilate even more cautious, they say that he has been inciting people against Caesar, that anyone who does not proceed against him is against Caesar. On four separate occasions John has Pilate tell them and the mob that he finds Jesus guilty of no wrong. But they demand, and secure Jesus' crucifixion.

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[50]*John*, 11.48-53. [51]*John*, 11.57.

And thus is forged the charge-sheet which has justified the persecution of the Jews for two millennia.

All this is done, to use the expression so favoured by our scholars, for "theological reasons" – in plain language, it reflects what, in view of its sharpening conflict with the Jewish establishment, was convenient for the Church.

10

Silence as evidence

Pilate has washed his hands off the innocent Jesus. At the clamour of the crowd, instigated as it is by the Jewish authorities, he has sent Jesus to be crucified.

The trek to Golgotha differs from one Gospel to the other: occurrences in one do not figure in others. Even events that are at the centre of the Christian myth, which indeed have become figures of our common speech – the soldiers putting that crown of thorns on Jesus' head, for instance – events which form so dramatic a part of one Gospel are totally missing from the others. "The Passion narrative (*Mark* 14-15 and parallels) is difficult to harmonize with what we know of Jewish legal procedure in the 1st century," the authority from the Union Theological Seminary, at New York, begins his account of the events leading to the crucifixion in *The Encyclopedia Americana*.[1] Having listed the reasons for which the accounts in the Gospels even of Jesus' trial cannot be trusted, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* observes – without adducing any evidence, of course – that events such as Judas' betrayal, Jesus' last meal, Peter's denial "are certainly historical". But even it is constrained to remark about these and other events that, apart from the trial, "The other scenes in the Passion story do not need to be listed separately. They relate more to the theological meaning of Jesus' Passion and are, to a large measure, formed in an edifying cultic manner."[2]

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[1] *The Encyclopedia Americana,* Volume XVI, p. 44.

[2] *Encyclopaedia Britannica, Macropaedia,* Volume XXII, p. 345.

That is the common view which one can find listed even in general reviews like those contained in encyclopedias. But here in India not just missionary publications, even secular newspapers and magazines narrate the events as if they were merely reproducing accounts of eyewitnesses! It will, therefore, pay us to sample an occurrence or two relating to these final hours.

Jesus is nailed to the cross. According to Matthew, he cries out in a loud voice, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" "And straight away one of them [from among those who were standing around] ran, and took a spunge, and filled it with vinegar, and put it on a reed, and gave him to drink," Matthew says. "The rest said", he continues, "Let be, let us see whether Elias will come to save him."[3] Jesus does not seem to get to drink the soporific. Mark, from whom, as we shall see, *Matthew* borrowed wholesale, gives a similar account.[4] Even though it forms the penultimate climax in Mark and Matthew, the incident does not figure in Luke at all.[5]

It figures in John all right, but to a different end. Jesus has just spoken to a disciple – we shall come to this in a moment – "After this, Jesus knowing that all things were now accomplished, that the scripture might be fulfilled, saith, I thirst," reports John. "Now there was set a vessel full of vinegar: and they filled a spunge with vinegar, and put it upon hyssop, and put it to his mouth. When Jesus therefore had received the vinegar, he said, It is finished: and he bowed his head, and gave up the ghost."[6]

Two bandits have also been nailed to crosses, one to Jesus' left and one to his right. In Matthew and in Mark passers-by and, of course, the chief priests mock Jesus, and so do the bandits. There are no exchanges with the bandits.[7] In Luke upon being nailed and mocked, Jesus says those famous

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[3] *Matthew*, 27.46-49. [4] *Mark*, 15.35-36. [5] cf., *Luke* 23.44-46.
[6] *John*, 19.28-30. [7] *Matthew*, 27.32-44.

words, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."[8] It isn't just that these words do not occur in any of the other Gospels, as the *Good News Bible* notes, "some manuscripts [of *Luke* itself] do not have [them]."[9]

In Matthew and in Mark, as we just noted, both the bandits join the passers-by in mocking Jesus. Neither Gospel says that Jesus had any exchanges with them. In Luke, on the other hand, only one of the two criminals mocks Jesus: "And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him," Luke writes, "saying, If thou be Christ, save thyself and us." Instead of joining this thief in his mockery as he does in the other two Gospels, "the other answering rebuked him, saying, Dost thou not fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation?" Not only that, this second bandit remarks on what a difference there is between them and Jesus: "And we indeed [are being crucified] justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this man hath done nothing amiss." He proceeds further: instead of mocking Jesus as in Matthew and Mark, he implores Jesus: "And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom." And Jesus responds, full of compassion: "And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise."[10] In John, the bandits are there all right. But neither incident transpires – they do not mock him, nor does Jesus exchange any words with them.[11]

On the other hand, John reports one exchange which none of the others do. All report that among those who were present was Mary, the mother of Jesus. "When Jesus therefore saw his mother, and the disciple standing by, whom he loved," reports John, "he saith unto his mother, Woman, behold thy son! Then saith he to the disciple, Behold thy mother! And from that hour that disciple took her into his own

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[8] *Luke*, 23.34.

[9] *Good News Bible, Today's English Version,* The Bible Society of India, Bangalore, The New Testament, p. 114, note *c*.

[10] *Luke*, 23.39-43.

[11] *John*, 19.16-30.

home...." And then follow the vinegar, and Jesus' exclaiming, "It is finished."[12]

Notice that here in John, the last words are these, "It is finished." In Mark and Matthew, there is the cry of despair and incomprehension, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" In Luke, Jesus is in an altogether different mental state. He commends himself to God with the serene words, "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit."[13] Clearly, the import of the words is entirely different. Will Durant offers a typical explanation: the words in Mark and Matthew, he notes, follow *Psalm* 22,18; "perhaps finding such words repugnant to the theology of Paul," Will Durant says, Luke "substitutes for them, 'Father into thy hands I commend my spirit,'" "which in turn", Durant writes, "echoes *Psalm* 31,5 with suspicious accuracy."[14] How apposite the words of the writer of the essay in the *Macropaedia*, that all these things "are.... to a large measure, formed in an edifying cultic manner...." But our missionaries recite all of them – taking care to select the set that best suits the occasion!

Jesus has died – the hour assigned differs. In John, Jesus just gives up the ghost. The soldiers come. They break the legs of the bandits. Seeing that Jesus is already dead, they do not break his legs – and that too is in accordance with what has been set out in a scripture. One of them pierces his body – and that too fulfills a scriptural prophecy. Nothing happens as far as the environment is concerned. Jesus' body is taken down, and eventually consigned to the tomb.[15] In Mark and Luke, on the other hand, the event is of such force that the curtain which hangs in the Jewish Temple is rent in two.[16]

In Matthew, on the third hand, cataclysmic consequences follow: "Jesus, when he had cried again with a loud voice,

[12] *John*, 19. 25-27.
[13] *Matthew*, 27.46; *Mark*, 15.34; *Luke*, 23.46; *John*, 19.30.
[14] Will Durant, *Caesar and Christ*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1944, pp. 572-73.
[15] *John*, 19.30-42.
[16] *Mark*, 15.38; *Luke*, 23.45.

yielded up the ghost," he reports; "And, behold, the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom; and the earth did quake, and the rocks rent; And the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints which slept arose, And came out of the graves after his resurrection, and went into the holy city, and appeared unto many."[17]

When such earth-shaking events occur, and the very ones who would be expected most of all to focus on them do not so much as mention them, that silence is itself evidence, it creates an overwhelming presumption. In *The Age of Reason,* the book that almost cost him his life, Thomas Paine remarked two hundred years ago,

> Now, if it had been true that those things had happened, and if the writers of those books had lived at the time they did happen, and had been persons they are said to be, namely, the four men called apostles, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, it was not possible for them, as true historians, even without the aid of inspiration, not to have recorded them. The things, supposing them to have been facts, were of too much notoriety not to have been known, and of too much importance not to have been told. All these supposed apostles must have been witnesses to the earthquake, if there had been any; for it was not possible for them to have been absent from it; the opening of the graves and the resurrection of the dead men, and their walking about the city, is of greater importance than the earthquake. An earthquake is always possible and natural, and proves nothing; but this opening of the graves is supernatural, and directly in point to their doctrine, their cause, and their apostleship. Had it been true, it would have filled up whole chapters of those books, and been the chosen theme and general chorus of all the writers; but instead of this, little and trivial things, and mere prattling conversations of, *he said this,* and *he said that,* are often tediously detailed, while this, most important of all, had it been true, is passed off in a slovenly manner by a single dash of the pen, and that by one writer only, and not so much as hinted at by the rest.
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> It is an easy thing to tell a lie, but it is difficult to support the lie after it is told. The writer of the book of Matthew should have told us who the

[17]*Matthew,* 27.50-53.

> saints were that came to life again, and went into the city, and what became of them afterward, and who it was that saw them – for he is not hardy enough to say he saw them himself;.... whether they remained on earth, and followed their former occupation, or working; or whether they died again, or went back to their graves alive, and buried themselves.
>
> Strange, indeed, that an army of saints should return to life, and nobody know who they were, nor who it was who saw them, and that not a word more should be said upon the subject, nor these saints have anything to tell us!.... But instead of this, these saints were made to pop up, like Jonah's gourd in the night, for no purpose at all but to wither in the morning....[18]

Earthquake or no earthquake, saints leaping out of their graves or not, Jesus dies. His body is interred. The tomb is sealed with a huge boulder. The body vanishes. He appears again to this set of his disciples or that. Or does he? The Gospel according to Mark ends with the women rushing away from the empty tomb, "for they trembled and were amazed," they say nothing to anyone "for they were afraid."[19] It is now widely acknowledged that the verses[20] which maintain that Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene and others are later addenda. Similarly, John's account of the reappearances ends midway: for there are serious grounds for believing that all of John, 21 is a "literary epilogue", an "appendix" added on later for special purposes of the Church's future programme.[21]

The resurrection is pictured as yet another fulfillment of what had been prophesied in the scripture. Matthew describes the famous encounter. The scribes and Pharisees ask Jesus for a sign of his special relationship with God. Jesus reprimands them, and says, "An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be

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[18]Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason, 1793/1794*, Prometheus Books, New York, 1984, pp. 153-55.

[19]*Mark*, 16.8. [20]*Mark*, 16.9-19.

[21]See, for instance, John M. Court, *Reading the New Testament*, Routledge, London, 1997, pp. 137-54.

given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas: For Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth."[22] A minor, but none the less embarrassing fact: as Thomas Paine remarked, going by the Gospels themselves, Jesus left the grave within 36 hours instead of the prophesied 72. There is more than an arithmetical problem here. For scholars see that Jesus had talked of resurrection in a corporate sense – in the sense of the community of believers as a whole being resurrected once the Kingdom of God broke out on earth, and not of his being resurrected as an individual. *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* summarizes the position: "Critical scholarship regards the predictions by Jesus of his own resurrection (*Mark* 8.31; etc.) as creations of the post-Easter community after the event. Since, however, Jesus' preaching of the kingdom implied resurrection, there can be no question that he foresaw the corporate resurrection of God's people as lying beyond his death (*Mark* 14.25). But there is nothing in his authentic preaching to suggest that he expected an individual resurrection for himself."[23]

But, strange to say, the exact opposite has transpired! He arose as an individual. The community of believers is still waiting – two thousand years after his death.

In Mark the disciples are told to proceed to Galilee, in Matthew they actually go to Galilee and it is there that Jesus appears to them, in Luke all the appearances of the resurrected Jesus take place in and around Jerusalem.[24] In any event, in Galilee and Jerusalem, or around and in Jerusalem alone, risen, Jesus appears – to this group or that. And then he ascends to heaven. *Does he?* Matthew, who, as

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[22] *Matthew*, 12.38-40.

[23] *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, Bruce M. Metzger, Michael D. Coogan, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1993, p. 647.

[24] cf., for instance, H.C. Kee, E.M. Meyers, John Rogerson, A.J. Saldarini, *The Cambridge Companion to the Bible*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997, p. 525.

we have seen, never misses an opportunity to put in elaborate accounts of whatever will redouble one's faith, has absolutely nothing on the matter. That Gospel just ends with the risen Jesus speaking his final words to the disciples.[25] Mark as it originally existed also has nothing about Jesus being taken into heaven – for it ends with the distressed and terrified women fleeing from the empty tomb.[26] In the passages which were added on, the risen Jesus appears thrice – to Mary Magdalene, then to the two disciples while they are on their way to the country, and finally to the eleven in Jerusalem. He exhorts them. "So then after the Lord had spoken unto them," the add-ons inform us, "he was received up into heaven, and sat on the right hand of God."[27] The ascent takes place from Jerusalem. In Luke too Jesus appears to the eleven at Jerusalem. He addresses them at greater length. Having done so, "he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifted up his hands, and blessed them. And it came to pass, while he blessed them, he was parted from them, and carried up to heaven. And they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. And were continually in the temple, praising and blessing God...."[28] Alas! There is not a word about being lifted up to heaven in John – that ends with ascribing words to Jesus so as to refute the charge that, John says, has been put out since – regarding yet another prophecy of Jesus not coming true....

In any event, assume Jesus has ascended to heaven. How many days had passed between his resurrection and ascent? How many days had he been moving around, meeting disciples, counselling them, etc., here on earth? Forty days, we are told in the *Book of Acts,* [1.3.] Five hundred and fifty days, we learn in the Gnostic Epistles of the Apostles....[29]

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[25]*Matthew,* 28.16-20.
[26]*Mark,* 16.8.
[27]*Mark,* 16.19.
[28]*Luke,* 24.50-53.
[29]For instance, *The Oxford Companion to the Bible, op. cit.,* pp. 39-40.

The figure of faith

11

The figure of faith

"But that is exactly the point," they say in raised tones. "That is precisely why the Lord has said, 'The letter killeth, the spirit giveth life.' You are nit-picking, going on about discrepancies between the account of an event in one Gospel and that in another. But the details in the Gospels are not what are important. It is the figure of faith they weave."

That is a somersault, surely. Ever since Christianity was brought to India, the missionaries have advanced as one of the decisive arguments in its favour that Jesus is a figure of history while our gods are creatures of imagination, that the life of Jesus is "documented" in The Book – directly dictated by God, in the alternate written at His direction and under His inspiration – while the accounts of our gods are in sundry books, oozing, to recall Macaulay's derision, with "medical doctrines which would move laughter in girls at an English boarding school, history abounding with kings thirty feet high and reigns 30,000 years long, and geography made up of seas of treacle and seas of butter.... a literature admitted to be of small intrinsic value.... (one) that inculcates the most serious errors on the most important subjects.... hardly reconcilable with reason, with morality.... fruitful of monstrous superstitions.... false history, false astronomy, false medicine.... in company with a false religion...."

And now, suddenly – "the details are not important, it is the figure of faith the Gospels create...." If the figure of faith is what is important, what, pray, is the reason to prefer Jesus over Ram and Krishna? After all, as a figure of faith, the latter have sustained millions upon millions for far longer than

Jesus! And they have done so without the well-oiled, and so well-heeled machinery of a church!

Moreover, is the faith evidence of some trait in Jesus – or in the believer? Is the faith, and the resultant holiness in Jesus? Or is it something in us – *our* need, *our* despair to believe?

The circularity strikes one from a mile. *Mela*-like gatherings of charismatic healing are staged with great fanfare across the country. Thousands of desperate patients and their relatives throng to these gatherings. The congregations are among the most fertile occasions for enlarging the harvest. Jesus heals, the missionaries proclaim. The miracles in the Gospels in which he cured a paralytic, in which the blind began to see, in which the deaf began to hear are recalled as literal truths. But there is always the catch: only those who have true faith shall be healed, the preacher slips in. Therefore, have true faith in Jesus, he screams. Remember the woman who had been bleeding for twelve years?, he asks. She got to touch Jesus' garment, the bleeding stopped. But what did our Lord tell her? He opens Mark, Chapter 6 and reads, "Daughter, thy faith hath made thee whole...." Therefore, develop that intense faith in Jesus, and that faith shall make you whole, he says. The preacher reads from the next chapter. And be not like the men and women of that village, he shouts, of whom Saint Mark has remarked that our Lord Jesus "marveled because of their unbelief...." And the climax: the son who had been possessed since he was a child. Desperate, the father has brought him to the followers of Jesus. They are unable to drive the spirit out. The scribes mock and question the followers. Jesus arrives. The father explains the plight of the son: the child foams, he gnashes his teeth, he pines, he falls to the ground, "and wallowed foaming." I spoke to your disciples, the father says, and they could not drive the spirit. "O faithless generation", Jesus exclaims – take into your heart what Jesus is saying, our preacher, looking up from the text, says in a raised voice, "O *faithless* generation": the Lord is talking of *us*, he is talking of

everyone here, he says. It is faith we have to acquire. He returns to the father's pleading: "And ofttimes it hath cast him into the fire, and into the waters, to destroy him," the father explains, and implores Jesus, "If thou canst do any thing, have compassion on us, and help us." And see what our Lord Jesus tells the father of that helpless child, "If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth" – that is the essence, believe, believe, our preacher shouts....

How can one say that I have true faith, that I believe or not? If I do, I am healed. If I am not healed, it shows that I do not have true faith....

And how do I acquire that faith? By surrendering to Jesus, the missionaries exclaim. And how will we know that I have surrendered to Jesus? By the fact of my having acquired the requisite faith. If I lack in faith that shows that my surrender is incomplete....

Anointing: when it heals, and why it does not

"He who feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood," John has Jesus say, "has life eternal, and I will raise him up on the last day."[1] And on the strength of that the Church exhorts its ministers to rush to administer the sacrament of anointing to the sick and the dying – "rush" does seem the right word, for the Church tells its clergy, "A prudent or probable judgment about the seriousness of the illness is all that is required. There is no reason to be scrupulous in the matter, but if necessary a doctor may be consulted."[2] What is the statement, "He who feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has life eternal, and I will raise him up on the last day," but an assertion? What is the belief that there *is* an "eternal life", that there is a "last day", that some persons will be selectively

[1] *John*, 6.54.
[2] Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship, *Hominum dolores, Introduction to the Rite of Anointing and to the Pastoral Care of the Sick*, 7 December, 1972, 8.

"raised up" on that day, and these will be those who have eaten Jesus' "flesh" and drunk his "blood", what are these but propositions which have to be taken on faith?

Since the Council of Trent the Church has been claiming that this anointing is "a divine institution" – the claim can be accepted only on faith. It relies on the statement of James, the brother of Jesus, that if there is someone sick, presbyters of the Church should be sent for, and "They in turn are to pray over him with oil in the name of the Lord. This prayer uttered in faith will reclaim the one who is ill, and the Lord will restore him to health. If he has committed any sins, forgiveness will be his."[3] That Jesus can and will forgive us – that is, set us free from the consequences of the wrongs we do – upon this prayer being said is also just a matter of faith.

Next, notice that James' assurance is absolute: "This prayer uttered in faith *will* reclaim the one who is ill, and the Lord *will* restore him to health." Now, given mind-body relationships, that a person believes that a ritual will cure him is liable to facilitate his recovery, no doubt. But it is the belief, not the ritual of anointing which helps get him back on his feet – any other ritual, provided the patient believes in it as much, will do.

And even in the case of devout Christians, the ritual of anointing may not! The Church is certainly aware of this, and hedges against failure being taken as proof to the contrary. There was already a caveat in James' claim itself: for the prayer to work it must be "uttered in faith", so that, if it does not work, it is not the prayer which lacks in potency, it is that it was not uttered with the requisite faith! The Church has since fortified the caveats, making out that when the prayer does not work there is a higher purpose being served, that it has not worked to design! Anointing the ritual as "a divine institution," the Council of Trent observed,

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[3]*James,* 5.14-15.

> The central reality is the grace of the Holy Spirit. The anointing removes any remaining sin and its remnants. It brings relief and strength to the soul of sick persons, making them greatly confident in the divine mercy. Thus sustained, they can more easily bear their illness, be better able to withstand the temptations of the devil in ambush (*Genesis* 3:15) *and sometimes they regain bodily strength, if this will contribute to the health of the soul.* (Decree for the Armenians)....

In a word, to start with "sometimes they regain bodily strength," and, second, when patients do not recover, there is a divine calculus behind their decline – recovery would not be good for the health of their soul! The decree of Pope Paul VI on the sacrament of anointing the sick and dying recalls this explanation with approval![4]

Thus, a matter of faith twice over! When it works, you must take it on faith that the prayer has worked. When it does not, you must take it on faith that its not working is good for the health of your soul!

The scholars are not far behind. "It is only those with faith who can receive healing," *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* explains after citing some of the miracles, and referring us to passages in Mark, "and the stories themselves become paradigms for the meaning of faith. The man who has ears but cannot hear till Jesus touches them (7.31-37), the blind man who has eyes but cannot see, and who receives his sight gradually (8.22-26), the man who cries, 'I believe; help my unbelief' (9.24), and the beggar who receives his sight and follows Jesus on the way to Jerusalem (10.46-52) all tell us something of what belief in Jesus means."[5]

The circularity apart, so much is now known of the mind-body relationship that no one would doubt that the touch or

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[4]Pope Paul VI, *Sacrum unctionem infirmorum, Apostolic Constitution on the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick*, 30 November, 1972.

[5]*The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, Bruce M. Metzger, Michael D Coogan, editors, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1993, p. 495.

blessing of a charismatic person, of a person who one is convinced can cure one, such a touch or blessing can indeed trigger a breakthrough. It is also possible that Jesus had this power in large measure, in uncommon measure. But that being the root of the ensuing cure, has the Church warrant to claim so much on behalf of Jesus and at the same time belittle accounts of persons who affirm that they have been vaulted out of their torment by other healers? By the presence of Ramana Maharshi? By Sai Baba?

To be taken on faith

Nor is it a question only of the general nature of figures and objects of faith. This sudden turn-around – from historicity being the decisive consideration to historical facts being unimportant – cuts deeper. For the Jesus of the Gospels is not just a figure of faith, he is a figure who has to be taken on faith. True, we cannot construct anything definite about him from the Gospels, scholars and churchmen concede, but about the fact that he existed there can be no doubt. But when the sources for him are only the Gospels, and similar material, and when they are so patently flawed, how does that "but about the fact that he existed...." follow?

Assume that it follows, that about the fact that Jesus existed there is no doubt. But that, as we noted earlier, is hardly something that would set him apart – countless others, including all of us, have existed, for far longer than the Bible says the world has existed. The point is that everything which *does* make Jesus special has to be taken on faith. The virgin birth; the opening of the heavens upon John baptizing him, the descending of the Spirit, and the celestial voice proclaiming that Jesus is the beloved Son of God, that God is well pleased with him; the miracles; the exorcisms; the prophecies in the Old Testament of which he and his life, his death, his resurrection are said to have been a fulfillment; his prophecies of his own suffering; that he was crucified as "a

ransom for many,"[6] that he died for our sins, that our sins have been absolved by his crucifixion; that this was the best way for God to demonstrate His compassion for us – to send down His Son, and have him nailed to the cross: wouldn't it have been more to the point for Him to have had Satan in the shape of a serpent impaled on that cross?, the irrepressible Paine had inquired; that though our sins were absolved by the sacrifice of Jesus, we continue to suffer, that the world in general continues to have so much cruelty and suffering; the disappearance of the body; the resurrection; the appearances to the disciples; the sonship of God; God Himself.... – each of these is "a matter of faith," exactly at par with, say, the belief of our tribals that spirits dwell in the trees they revere....

Is the Trinity anything other than a "matter of faith"? Is the belief that this community – those who believe in Jesus – is the one Chosen of God rather than every other community – those who believe in Jehovah, those who believe in Allah – which claims as much on its behalf: what is this exclusivist claim but a "matter of faith"? What is the belief – common to the Jews, the Christian Church, and the Islamic *Ummah* – that history, specially their own history, is the unfolding of the purpose of God except a "matter of faith"? What is the belief that their community is being taken through suffering for a purpose, that in the end God will ensure triumph except a "matter of faith"? What are the several "signs" by which Jesus and God make known Jesus' special proximity to God except "matters of faith"? That he changed water into wine at the wedding feast when the hosts ran out of wine, that he healed the son of the nobleman by his mere word though the son was dying;[7] that a man who has been lame for thirty eight years should rise and walk at Jesus asking him to do so;[8] that a multitude of five thousand which has followed him should get fed on next to nothing;[9] that when his disciples have gone

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[6]*Mark*, 10.45, 14.24.
[7]*John*, 4.46-54.
[8]*John*, 5.5-9.
[9]*John*, 6.2-14.

twenty to thirty furlongs into the sea, Jesus should come to them walking on water[10] – what are these but matters one must accept on faith? The assertion that the man who had been born blind was born with that handicap not because of sheer chance, nor, as some would have it, because he or his parents had sinned, "but that the works of God should be made manifest in him" – in this case, so that Jesus may perform a miracle and make this blind man see – and that the man is able to see because Jesus, having spat on the ground, applies the clay mixed with his spittle to the man[11] – is either the assertion or the happening other than something one has to believe or not as a "matter of faith"? That Lazarus, dead four days, buried in a cave should be restored to life at Jesus commanding him, "Lazarus, come forth," "And that he that was dead came forth, bound hand and foot with graveclothes: and his face was bound up with a napkin"[12] – is believing that event not another "matter of faith"?

That when Jesus is being proffered temptations by the devil angels administer to him;[13] that he calms the tumultuous storm;[14] that he walks on water;[15] that he is, as he says, "the bread of life";[16] that those who "eat the true bread from heaven" in that they accept Jesus and no other, shall share in eternal life;[17] that he, Jesus, is the one and only way to God, that he who has known him, Jesus, has known God;[18] that he dies for our sins, that his being killed is in fact a triumph of the forces of good over those of evil as he was resurrected, that he came from God, that he returned to God, that in his death he actually overcame the world[19] – which of these propositions is any more than a "matter of faith"?

Recall the much-vaunted "transfiguration scene".[20] Jesus takes Peter, James and John into a high mountain. There, as

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[10] *John*, 6.15-21.
[11] *John*, 9.1-41.
[12] *John*, 11.
[13] *Mark*, 1.12-13.
[14] *Mark*, 4.35-41.
[15] *Mark*, 6.45-52.
[16] *John*, 6.35.
[17] *John*, 6.32-35.
[18] *John*, 14.6-7.
[19] *John*, 16.24-33.
[20] *Mark*, 9.1-13; *Matthew*, 17.1-9.

they watch, he is transfigured: "and his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light," says Matthew; Moses and Elias appear; a bright cloud overshadows them, and a voice breaks through the cloud, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him." "And when the disciples heard it, they fell on their face, and were sore afraid," Matthew tells us. This is a celebrated incident – further "proof" that Jesus was the chosen Son of God. But is there an iota more proof for this occurrence than for other "transfiguration scenes"? Any greater proof than for the vision Daniel saw[21], a vision the replica of which this account in Mark and Matthew is said to be?

A representative example

It is indeed a good exercise to read through some authoritative enunciation of the *Credo* of a Christian, to list from it the number of elements which have to be taken on faith, and ask how any of these elements has a more substantive basis than the beliefs of our people in Krishna and Ram which these missionaries parody. A good example at hand is Pope Paul VI's *Solemni hac liturgia, The Credo of the People of God*. Here is a representative passage from it:

> We believe in eternal life. We believe that the souls of all those who die in the grace of Christ – whether they must still make expiation in the fire of Purgatory, or whether from the moment they leave their bodies they are received by Jesus into Paradise like the good thief – go to form the People of God which succeeds death, death which will be totally destroyed on the day of Resurrection when these souls are reunited with their bodies.
> We believe that the multitude of those souls gathered round Jesus and Mary in Paradise forms the Heavenly Church. There they enjoy eternal happiness, seeing God as He is. There also, in different

[21] *Daniel*, 10.1-21.

degrees and ways, they share with the holy angels in that exercise of divine power which belongs to Christ in his glory when they intercede for us and come to the aid of our weakness in brotherly care.[22]

Five sentences in all, and sixteen propositions you have to take on faith:

1. That there is "eternal life";
2. That there is a Paradise;
3. That Jesus and Mary are sitting there;
4. That there is a Purgatory;
5. That some "souls that die" have to "make expiation in the fire of Purgatory";
6. That other souls "from the moment they leave their bodies are received by Jesus into Paradise";
7. That there is a People of God "which succeeds death";
8. That death is "totally destroyed on the day of the Resurrection";
9. That on the day of the Resurrection "these souls are reunited with their bodies";
10. That thereafter they "enjoy eternal happiness";
11. That there is a God;
12. That having been received in Paradise, these souls get to "see God as He is";
13. That there are holy angels;
14. That they "share in the exercise of divine power";
15. That ensconced in Paradise, these souls also get to share with the angels the exercise of divine power;
16. That they direct this divine power in our interest by interceding for us and coming to the aid of our weaknesses.

Sixteen matters to be taken on faith in just five sentences! And missionaries traduce our religions for being nothing but a string of fables!

Or take the *shraddha* ceremonies that the Hindus do. For the missionary these are just the vestige of unmitigated superstition. But on what does the high – and lucrative – edifice of Indulgences rest but superstition?

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[22]Pope Paul VI, *Solemni hac liturgia, The Credo of the People of God*, 30 June, 1968.

That "by the hidden and kindly mystery of God's will a supernatural solidarity reigns among men"; that as a consequence both the holiness and sins of one are transferable to, they are transmitted to others; that "we can see *evidence* of this solidarity in *the fact* that Adam's sin is passed on through propagation to all men" – notice the words "evidence of", "the fact that" as if that Adam's sin is being transmitted down the generations is some proven fact; that there is one great reservoir available to all – for Jesus died for our sins;[23] that the merits earned and stored up by the saints too can be parcelled out for our redemption; that the keys to this reservoir have been handed to Peter and through him to his successor, the Pope; that by his having delegated the power to them, the bishops decide on the way and extent to which "satisfaction" is to be made; that they may decide to grant a partial indulgence or a complete one; that all this having been established, the Church "condemns with anathema those who say that indulgences are useless or that the Church does not have the power to grant them"; that we gain particular merit in charity by obtaining indulgences for the dead – these propositions are not contained in the writings and encyclicals of the middle ages, they are the *current* doctrine.[24] Which step in this long sequence rests on anything more than what, were it urged by the clergy of some other religion, the Church would condemn as superstition?

At every turn, inventive arguments

And a new argument at every turn. "It is not the individual detail of Jesus' life which is important," the very ones who had been proclaiming that Jesus was unique in that every detail of his life had been documented now began saying, "It is the personality of Jesus, the example of Jesus which

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[23]Actually as Jesus saves only Christians that expression should read, "That Jesus died for the sins of Christians."

[24]*c.f.*, Pope Paul VI, *Indulgentiarum doctrina, Apostolic Constitution on the Revision of Indulgences*, 1 January, 1967.

emerges from the Gospels which is important." But veracity does not inhere in a "personality" or "example" which has been created by the Gospels any more than it inheres in a personality or example created in any other morality play: surely one must first establish the truth of the person and life.

"The resurrection is visible – Jesus rose and lives through the Church, the body of Christ," those most likely to benefit from the proposition, the churchmen say. Can one therefore say that "Ramakrishna Paramhamsa too rose – he lives in and through the Ramakrishna Mission?"

"But on the testimony of so many of his disciples, Jesus reappeared to them after his death, he moved with them, he counselled them, he ate with them," our friends say. That the "testimony" does not cohere apart, devotees of Shirdi Sai Baba are just as certain that he has continued to appear to them after his death. "But there is the witness of so many today, through Christ they have experienced the transforming and liberating power of God." The devotees of Sai Baba of Puttaparthi testify that they experience an equally charged transforming and liberating power through him, they affirm that he appears to them in far away places, that he has in front of their eyes cleared hindrances from their lives, that he has appeared and offered them guidance when they were thousands of miles away, that he has stepped in and shielded them from harm.

Commentators now freely concede that the evangelists shifted the emphasis, they "edited" events and sayings depending on what they thought would best ensure belief and following. The story or event – for instance, the account of Jesus being anointed – is not to be seen in itself, they argue. From this it follows, they extrapolate, that one should not focus on the differences in details the accounts furnish; rather one should get to the core of the event, and grasp its significance. Each evangelist had told that version of the story which he felt would fortify the overall message which he

wanted to convey through his Gospel taken as a whole.[25] On this reasoning the question that is important is not whether the facts included in a particular narrative (or left out of it) agree with the facts included or excluded in some other narrative, but whether they serve to enhance the message that the evangelist set out to convey. Surely, this sort of reasoning puts the Gospels at par with ordinary literary creations – a poem, a novel, say.

Moreover, if this is regarded as a valid way for the evangelists to construct their accounts, should Jesus' life as a whole which emerges from the Gospels not be taken as a meta-parable, as that life which the evangelists thought would best ensure belief and following? How can it be that we freely acknowledge in regard to incident after incident that it has been sifted for "theological reasons" but insist that the whole made up of precisely those incidents is trustworthy? Could it not be that the life taken as a whole too has been imagineered for the moral that had to be conveyed, for generating the example which it was thought necessary to advance?

"But the very fact that the accounts in the Old and New Testaments have had such an enormous effect over such a long period on so many millions – surely that fact itself tells us that there must be the kernel of truth in them." On that reasoning, as I noted earlier, the legends of Krishna and Rama – deities whom missionaries have been denigrating for centuries – must be all the more true. That apart, in such defence the expression "truth" is used in two widely different senses. In the sense that the stories must have had a kernel of truth – this version remains a *non sequitur*. And in the sense that the stories answer a deep quest, that they answer to a deep yearning in human nature – but that is true

[25]See, for instance, John M. Court, *Reading the New Testament*, Routledge, *New Testament Readings*, London, 1997, pp. 62-63.

of all myths, as the work of Jung, of Joseph Campbell, and others has set out: after all, Christian myths are not the only ones which have endured down the ages.

More esoteric formulations are advanced. The Bible is not to be identified with past revelation, Karl Barth, one of the principal Christian theologians of this century, argued. It bears witness to a revelation in the past, and its significance consists in the fact that it becomes the channel through which one may hear the voice of God today. But in this sense it can be no different from other means – the surrender in *Bhakti marg,* progressive unfolding in *Gyan marg,* the sudden insight in Zen....

Shorn of the miraculous

How bereft of a halo, even of mere significance is the bare event without the miraculous element – the element which one has to take on faith. Jesus feeds the multitude even though there was little food – that miracle has "multiple attestation", says *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*! It has "multiple attestation" because it is mentioned twice in Mark, and once in John, the scholars say! It isn't just that the occasions on which the same thing is reported by the two to have occurred are different. It isn't just that the scholars themselves note that the "stories" relating to the incidents were "shaped" in what they call "stage II" – that is, they form part of "materials shaped and transmitted in oral tradition." They note that even in this stage "they were modeled partly on the Eucharist tradition and partly on the Elisha story (2 *Kings* 4.42-44, whence the multiplication of the loaves derives)." If the story has been "modeled" on a story occurring in an earlier text, if it has been "modeled" *ex post* to conform to the subsequent tradition of the Eucharist, and the needs of the Church, how much credence is one to place on it?

"But such a meal itself may well be historical," the scholars add, "Jesus met with his followers in a remote place and ate with them...."[26] Surely, all sorts of people have meals with their companions in remote places. Neither they nor the meals become special because they have had such meals with their companions. What makes those meals of Jesus special is that, though the followers had little food, multitudes got fed. If the accounts of these have been "modeled" on some book, or if they have been crafted so as to give substance to some subsequent ritual, surely the meals lose their "theological" significance.

This mode of reasoning is taken even further on occasion – not just by the Church, even by scholars. What the Church asserts must be taken to have occurred, and what it prescribes the faithful must do is justified on the ground that that is what Jesus did or commanded they do. But when this becomes difficult to maintain in view of the discrepancies in the accounts, the opposite is argued – we must give credence to the accounts, it is said, because, without the story, what the Church has prescribed cannot be sustained!

The Oxford Companion to the Bible notes the differences in the accounts relating to the Last Supper – between the Gospels, and between them and *1 Corinthians*. And then proceeds to observe,

> What we have here, then, is an account of the essential elements in the Last Supper that formed the pattern for the church's meal. It has been argued that the story in the Gospels is not so much a part of the story of Jesus as a liturgical text that was preserved on its own and then inserted into the gospel narrative. Some scholars would go further and claim that the story is based on early Christian liturgies rather than on history, the accounts of what the church did having been read back into the lifetime of Jesus. Still others claim that the uncertainty in the tradition of Jesus' sayings and how they express

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[26] *The Oxford Companion to the Bible, op. cit.*, p. 358.

early Christian theology suggest that they are the creation of the early church (or at least that the original form has been heavily modified in transmission), with the result that we can no longer be sure what Jesus said. For example, the presence of the command to 'do this'[27] in remembrance of Jesus, which is lacking in Mark's account, given once in *Luke* and twice in *1 Corinthians*, could be due to the early church putting into words what it took to be the intention of Jesus. Even if this is the case, we would still be left with a tradition of Jesus' sharing a loaf and cup with his disciples, and these actions would invite interpretation. In other words, *to account for the origins of the church meal and the early Christians' appeal to Jesus we must surely postulate the historicity of some kind of meal he held.*[28]

The resurrection must have occurred, says the essayist in the *Chambers's Encyclopaedia*. "It is possible", he allows, "that there will always be differences of opinion as to what precisely took place [in regard to the tomb being found empty]; yet it is clear enough from such records as we have that *unless something epoch-making had happened there would have been no church to make any records at all.*"[29] Surely, that is some new mode of deduction: *post hoc, ergo ante hoc* – because 'X' has occurred *after* 'Y', it must have occurred *before* 'Y'!

And yet one can scarcely complain. For, in reasoning thus, the scholars, to say nothing of the Pope and his associates, are merely following the example set by the Apostles! Recall how Paul "proves" that Jesus *must* have risen from the dead. In Corinthians he asks,

[27]In *Mark* Jesus says, "This is my body"; in *1 Corinthians*, Jesus says, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me"; in *Mark* the next clause is, "This is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many"; in *Luke* the last words are "which is poured out for you"; in *1 Corinthians* additional words figure, "Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."

[28]*The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, *op. cit.*, pp. 465-66.

[29]*Chambers's Encyclopaedia*, George Newnes, London, 1959, 1963, Volume VIII, p. 86.

> Now if Christ be preached that he rose from the dead, how say some among you that there is no resurrection of the dead?

and answers,

> But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then is Christ not risen;
> And if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching in vain, and your faith is also vain.
> Yea, and we are found false witnesses of God; because we have testified of God that He raised up Christ: whom He raised not up, if so be that the dead rise not.
> For if the dead rise not, then is not Christ raised:
> And if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins.
> Then they also which are fallen asleep in Christ are perished.
> If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable.[30]

A textbook example of circular "proof"! Jesus must have risen. For if he did not rise, we, the Apostles, have been spreading falsehood; and you – that is, those who believe what we have taught you to believe – continue in sin; those who have died believing that he rose are imperiled; and we are deprived of any ground for hope beyond this life. As it cannot be that we are false, as it must not be that your faith has been misplaced, as those who have already died must not be left to perish, as the reason for hoping beyond this life must somehow be sustained, Jesus *did* rise! QED

Suddenly, the question of historicity is declared to be unduly limiting. Till the other day the resurrection was held up as – in preaching to our illiterate tribals, it is to this day held to be – conclusive proof of both – Jesus' divinity as well as his superiority over mere Krishna and Ram who did not rise after death, suddenly the question of historicity is proclaimed to be in a sense an irrelevance, for the event is meta-historical! "The resurrection, while a real event

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[30] *1 Corinthians*, 15.12-19.

according to the unanimous testimony [note the word] of the New Testament, is not a historical event in the sense that ordinary events are," *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* tells us. "It occurs at the point where history ends, and God's end-time begins [whatever that phrase means]. And it is not in itself an observable occurrence. No one saw God raise Jesus from the dead. Nor can it be verified. In a sense, it is an inference from the disciples' Easter visions (and to a lesser degree from the empty tomb....)."[31] Just a few lines later, this very *Companion* has the following to say about how this "unanimous testimony" came to be fashioned:

> Mark, generally regarded as the earliest Gospel, originally contained no appearance stories, but merely pointed forward to subsequent appearances in Galilee (16.7). Appearance stories seem to have grown up as isolated units (pericopes), like the bulk of the gospel material. Inevitably, what was originally indescribable came to be described in earthly terms. The risen Christ talked, walked, and even ate with his disciples as he had while on earth (*Matt.* 28; *Luke* 24; *John* 20, 21; *Mark* 16.9-20). Clearly, the only way post-apostolic community could construct appearance stories was to model them on the stories from the earthly ministry....[32]

Though this is how, on their own analysis, the stories "grew up", though this is how they came to be "constructed", together they constitute "unanimous testimony"! After setting out at length how the messianic appellations of Jesus evolved – and after showing how this evolution paralleled the needs of the Church to exalt and eventually deify him – the *Macropaedia* plays down the question itself! "The question appropriate to the Gospel tradition would, therefore, not be what has happened to Jesus of Nazareth in the course of the development," it instructs us, "but, rather, why the first Christians held fast to him. To ask in this way and to accept

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[31] *The Oxford Companion to the Bible, op. cit.*, p. 648.
[32] *Ibid.*, p. 648.

the answer of the Gospels are matters of faith. It goes beyond the limits of historical research."[33]

Of course, the asking of the question "in this way", and accepting the answer as it emerges from the Gospels "are matters of faith." That is precisely the point which the Church and its missionaries have been denying for centuries. They have been asserting that while our belief in Krishna or Rama are unsubstantiated "matters of faith", their faith in Jesus and everything they assert about him is grounded in history, that it is not "faith", it is fact. Substitute "Sai Baba" for "Jesus" in the forgoing lines: "The question appropriate to the Sai tradition would, therefore, not be what has happened to Sai Baba of Puttaparthi in the course of the development, but, rather, why millions hold fast to him. To ask in this way and to accept the answer his devotees, and Sai literature give are matters of faith. It goes beyond the limits of historical research." Does the altered passage go down the throat of missionaries? Why is the assertion valid in the case of the evolution of the Jesus legend, but baseless in the case of the evolution of the tradition of some other venerated figure? Specially when the evolution is taking place before our very eyes, specially when no one can doubt the historicity of the subject?!

In the sort of exercise which is typical, the *Chambers's Encyclopaedia* authorities go even further in endowing to the accounts a meaning which is just not there in the Gospels, a meaning that is contrived to clothe the accounts in the verisimilitude of veracity. They write,

> It is further very evident [note the words] that the Resurrection appearances are *not 'intimations of immortality' but recognitions of a familiar and beloved figure as alive and active*; and that the activity described frequently takes the form of commissioning the disciples and assigning tasks to them, which they are to do under the present guidance and control of the Master. [Notice that already the

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[33] *Encyclopaedia Britannica, Macropaedia,* Volume XXII, pp. 345-46.

appearances, from being an objective fact, have been converted into a subjective experience of the disciples.] *The actual formulation in words of these commissions may perhaps owe something to later reflection* [One can scarcely get much closer to conceding that the words are *ex post* manufacture.] but *the conviction of the real presence and purposeful activity of the living Lord Jesus in his community* is there from the beginning. [But so is the conviction in every devotee of the Shirdi Sai Baba.] All this the apostles described by saying that Jesus had 'risen from the dead', *which is a sufficiently accurate description of what in fact took place, namely the continuation into the life and work of the church, the new body of Christ, of the personal presence, guidance and power of the exalted Lord himself.*[34]

So, what was an objective fact – of the body of Jesus having vanished, of his having risen from the dead, of his having appeared after his death to his disciples, and having talked with them and walked with them and eaten with them – now becomes a *subjective experience* of the disciples. Whether it happened or not, whether they crafted the words describing the happening later or not, they were convinced from the beginning that he had risen, that he was present. In the Gospels he is very much in the flesh after his death: he walks, he talks, he eats with them. But now suddenly we are to believe that what is up and about is his new body – and this body is nothing but the Church!

In a word, the Church propagates the story it needs for its own propagation, the story that Jesus has been about. And the proof of that is that the Church is about!

The discomfort shows. Fidelity traps scholars in infirmity. On the one hand, the evidence is so overwhelming, and their commitment to facts so admirable that Biblical scholars do not just list the facts which researches over these many centuries have disclosed, they acknowledge the devastating consequences these discoveries and analyzes have for the

[34] *Chambers's Encyclopaedia*, Volume VIII, pp. 86-87.

claims of the Church and its missionaries. On the other, they cling to defences which can only invite compassion! "According to Matthew 20.19 and 26.2, Jesus said that once delivered to the gentiles he would suffer crucifixion," *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* notes, and adds, "The predictions of suffering by Jesus *are not necessarily* prophecies after the fact"![35] Having alluded to the fact that "the historical value of these collections [the Gospels] has been seriously questioned by the 'form-critical' school....," the *Chambers's Encyclopaedia* feels compelled to remark, "While, therefore, it is necessary to bring all the resources of literary and historical criticism to bear upon the material supplied in the New Testament, *it is not necessary to carry historical skepticism to the lengths to which it has been carried by some practitioners of form-criticism.*"[36] Hardly a sturdy defence!

Shielding fables

There is no doubt that in puncturing the claims of the Church scholars have led the way. For three hundred years they have relentlessly proceeded wherever their analysis has led them. Their intellectual and moral courage are an example. And yet, even today, we glimpse the same failure of nerve. Having listed the reasons on account of which so much in the Gospels cannot be taken at face value, having shown at length how they grew up piece by piece, the scholars observe, "The canon can still be understood to be God-given just as the contents of the scripture are God-given" – surely, that can only mean that the proposition that accepting the canon as God-given is as much "a matter of faith" as accepting the contents of the scripture as God-given is a matter of faith – "but not purely and supernaturally so –

[35] *The Oxford Companion to the Bible, op. cit.*, p. 142.
[36] *Chambers's Encyclopaedia*, Volume VIII, p. 83.

rather, only indirectly and through the mediation of human intentions and meanings" – are these "human intentions and meanings" to be regarded as independent of the said God, or as being directed by Him?, we are not told. "Biblical critics have not rejected the canon," *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* tells us, "*on the whole* they have continued to uphold it, maintaining that the religious content of the Bible (i.e. the canonical books) [notice, not the entire content, just "the religious content"!], is, *broadly speaking,* vastly superior in quality to that of any other set of written texts."[37] What a climb down! "On the whole," "the religious content", "broadly speaking," and after all that the claim only that the "quality" of this is "vastly superior" to other texts! An assertion which, apart from everything else, is certain to be disputed by every Muslim – for whom the literary excellence which is incomparable is that of the Quran, and that excellence is one of the principal proofs of its divine origin!

And then the familiar attempt to salvage whatever one can: "The resurrection, while a real event according to the unanimous testimony of the New Testament, is not historical in the sense that ordinary events are" – what is the other sense in which an event, extraordinary though it be, "historical"? "It occurs at the point where history ends and God's end-time kingdom begins," the scholars say.[38] How would they react were similar words being used to validate Krishna's assurance, *"yada yada he dharmasya glanirbhavati...."*? "The dialogue with Arjuna, while being a real event according to the unanimous testimony of Hindu scripture, is not historical in the sense that ordinary events are. It occurs at the point where history ends and God's direct intervention begins...."

The Church is, naturally, even more zealous in guarding the fables. For long it condemned and excommunicated

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[37] *The Oxford Companion to the Bible, op. cit.*, pp. 320-21.
[38] *Ibid.*, p. 648.

persons, it roasted them alive for calling into question, even by implication, what had been stated in the Bible or had been certified by it. Today, that is not possible. Even an organization which is able to command as much obedience from its members as the Church cannot shut the door entirely on inquiry and questioning. It adopts a tactical line, therefore: you may proceed to study and inquire, it says, but within limits. And what are the limits? Nothing that calls into question the Credo as sanctioned by us should be pursued!

"The Church certainly regards it as her duty never to relax in her efforts to penetrate more deeply the hidden mysteries of God, from which all derive the myriad fruits of salvation, and in like manner to express them to succeeding generations in a way progressively adapted to contemporary understanding," it says in words that the unwary may think open up avenues of free inquiry. *"But at the same time the greatest care must be taken that the important duty of research does not involve the undermining of the truths of Christian doctrine"* – but the very object of research is thereby killed, the object of ascertaining whether what is stated as "the Christian doctrine" is indeed the truth. And this limit the Church lays down only in the interest of the faithful! "If this happens", it goes on to observe, "and we have unfortunately seen it happen in these days – the result is perplexity and confusion in the minds of the faithful"[39] – nothing naturally to the effect that such research would undermine its own kingdom!

The same *uthe har nigah par baam tak na pahunche* approach to study and research is asserted in *Mysterium filii Dei,* the proclamation regarding *Errors concerning the Mysteries of the Incarnation and the Trinity.* That there are/is the Father, the Holy Spirit and the Son, that the Son is the only begotten one of the Father, that he was "before all ages", that

[39]Pope Paul VI, *Solemni hac liturgia, The Credo of the People of God,* 30 June, 1968.

he is "coeternal with the Father," that the three are one, the one three, etc., the usual assertions – each of which has to be taken on faith – are put forth in the document as if they are propositions based on proof. Every formulation which differs in the slightest from the Church-approved one is dismissed as "far removed from true belief," as one that "deviates from the faith." And the only "reason" that is advanced for sticking to the formulation of the Church is that even the slightest departure on one limb undermines the rest also:

> Once the mystery of the divine and eternal person of Christ the Son of God is abandoned, the truth respecting the Most Holy Trinity is also undermined, and with it the truth regarding the Holy Spirit who proceeds eternally from the Father and the Son, or from the Father through the Son....
> The unimpaired truth of these mysteries is of the greatest moment for the whole Revelation of Christ because they pertain to its very core in such a way that, if they are undermined, the rest of the treasure of Revelation is adulterated....

As everything else rests on these mysteries should be the reason for examining them all the more relentlessly! The Church draws the opposite conclusion:

> This certainly does not prevent the Church, in her awareness of the progress of human thought, from considering it her duty to have these mysteries continually examined by contemplation of the faith and theological examination, and to have them fully expounded in up-to-date terminology. *But while the necessary duty of investigation is being pursued, diligent care must be taken that these profound mysteries are not interpreted in a sense other than that in which 'the Church has understood and understands them'*....[40]

And again on the task of theologians, *badhe haath lekin jaam tak na pahunche!* "For them to be able to accomplish this task

[40]Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Mysterium filii Dei, Errors concerning the Mysteries of the Incarnation and the Trinity,* 21 February, 1972.

adequately, it is beyond doubt that they must be given the necessary freedom to investigate new questions and to further study the old ones," the Church declares, only to add,

> *However, they must put themselves humbly and faithfully at the service of the Word of God, and they must never make use of it to favour their own opinions.*
> *True freedom must always be contained within the limitations set by the Word of God as it has been constantly preserved and as it is taught and explained by the living magesterium of the Church and especially the Vicar of Christ.*
> *Let theologians be aware of their responsibility, which is indeed great, in seeking the truth with scientific honesty and in communicating their conclusions in such a way as to imbue their brethren with a spirit of love and reverence toward the Word of God and the teaching Church.*[41]

Lenin would not have needed to add a coma!

And yet again. Pointing to the danger that arises to the world from secularism, the Church declares,

> We do not mean by this secularization which is the effort, in itself quite proper and legitimate and in no way inconsistent with faith or religion, to discern in creation, in every thing and in every event in the whole world, universal laws by which they are controlled in what may be described as an autonomous manner. This is legitimate *provided we accept without question the fact that these laws have been established by God....*[42]

"*The fact* that these laws have been established by God"?

[41]Synod of Bishops, *Ratione habita, On Dangerous Opinions and on Atheism,* 28 October, 1967, 4.

[42]Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi,* 8 December, 1975, 55.

12

Another figure of faith, Another can of conundrums

For drilling faith in the new sect, the Apostles proceeded in two directions. On the one side they asserted that Jesus had been the messiah who had been prophesied in the Old Testament – this entailed altering passages of the Old Testament, it entailed reading "young woman" as "virgin", reading "Immaneul" to mean Jesus, and so on. On the other side, Jesus was progressively elevated in precisely the direction that would have infuriated the Old Testament God no end. As we shall soon see, the Old Testament God candidly speaks of Himself as the Jealous God, as the God who may pardon every thing but who shall never pardon one "sin" – if we put anything or anyone next to Him, much less at par with Him. But the Apostles proceeded to do just that: they identified Jesus more and more with God Himself. Each of these leaps created new problems.

The more the Gospels strove to portray Jesus as a fulfillment of prophecies contained in the Old Testament, the more they pushed Christianity into a basic problem. The central message about the arrival of the prophet had been that his advent would usher in "all things true and beautiful." Jesus arrived, or was sent. Peace, tranquillity, plenty, righteousness did not. On the contrary, he postponed the Kingdom till he returned a second time! And till then, he forecast even greater suffering! His postponement was till the closing years of those who were hearing him – fifty years, say. As those years also passed, and the Kingdom remained

as far away, his disciples postponed it yet again: this time into the indefinite, but still somehow imminent future!

One sent by God. The Son of Man. The Son of God. Indistinguishable from God Himself. By the time John's Gospel came to be gathered, this identification was complete. Thus, Jesus says, "My doctrine is not mine, but his that sent me. If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself."[1] A little later Jesus raises his voice in the Temple and cries, "Ye both know me, and ye know whence I am: and I am not come of myself, but he that sent me is true, whom ye know not. But I know him: for I am from him, and he hath sent me."[2] First the authorities of the Temple, then their men try to take him, but they do not, for "his hour was not yet come." The ordinary people ask him whether the Christ when he comes will perform more miracles than he is doing. Jesus tells them, among other things, "Yet a little while am I with you, and then I go unto him that sent me...."[3]

During the famous scene at the Temple, when Jesus lets go the woman who has been accused of adultery, the identification is carried much further. Jesus says that his judgment is true "for I am not alone, but I and the Father that sent me;"[4] that even by the law that requires two witnesses what he says is valid for "I am one that bear witness of myself, and the Father that sent me beareth witness of me."[5] Jesus tells them repeatedly that they do not know whence he came, that they can neither tell nor follow him where he will be going – to God.[6] "Ye are from beneath," Jesus tells them, "I am from above: ye are of this world; I am not of this world." Jesus warns them on this count, and completes his identification with God: "I said therefore unto you, that ye shall die in your sins: for if ye believe not *that I am he*, ye

[1] *John*, 7.16-17. [2] *John*, 7.28-29. [3] *John*, 7.33.
[4] *John*, 8.16. [5] *John*, 8.18. [6] *John*, 8.14, 21.

shall die in your sins." You will see all this only later on, Jesus says: "When ye have lifted up the Son of man, then ye shall know *that I am he*, and that I do nothing of myself; but as my Father hath taught me, I speak these things. And he that sent me is with me: the Father hath not left me alone; for I do always those things that please him."[7] Even as genealogies are set out in other Gospels tracing Jesus through David to Abraham, Jesus himself affirms that he has existed before the line even began: "Verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I am."[8] While commending his followers to God Jesus again affirms his identity with God. The hour has come, Jesus proclaims – the hour for the final events: his going to the garden, his arrest and all that is to follow. Jesus asks God to glorify him as he glorifies God: "And now I am no more in the world," Jesus tells God, "but these are in the world, and I come to thee. Holy Father, keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me, that they may be one, *as we are*."[9]

On the one hand, this put Christianity in direct confrontation with the tradition Jesus had said he was fulfilling – the tradition of Judaism and the Old Testament. For, as we just noted, the superimposition of Jesus on God certainly amounted to the very crime, to the very blasphemy which the Old Testament God had declared was the one crime He would never pardon. On the other, it had consequences in regard to those who had been close to Jesus in his lifetime. Mary the foremost among them. She started as one who had been chosen by God to be the mother of His Son. As the Son became the Father, she became the mother of the Father!

The ascent of Mary

Few errors of translation have had as long a run, or reached such heights as that one – of reading "young woman" as

[7] *John*, 8.23-29. [8] *John*, 8.58. [9] *John*, 17.11.

"virgin". From a mere two or three peripheral references in Mark to godhead of sorts, the cult of Mary has grown over the centuries to become one of the major cults – as well as one of the major enterprises – of the Church. There has been a twofold inevitability to this.

First, that he had been born miraculously – to a virgin, by the direct intervention of the Holy Spirit – became one of the main "proofs" of Jesus' proximity to God, of his having been sent by God, of his being the Chosen One. Once this "proof" became so important, Mary could not but be exalted: after all, one could not proclaim that the miracle was all-important, and not ascribe equal significance to the being – Mary – through whom God chose to manifest that miracle. Second, Jesus was exalted closer and closer to, and eventually made indistinguishable from God: again, one could not lift Jesus closer and closer to God and not simultaneously lift the one who had borne him into the world at the instance, and by the intervention of that very God.

As the centuries passed, to the event of virgin birth were added three notions. First, that Mary was a virgin not just when she conceived Jesus, she was and remained the "ever holy", the ever-virgin: that she was a virgin before Jesus' conception, that she was a virgin at Jesus' conception, that she remained a virgin during his birth, that she remained a virgin for the rest of her life. Second, that she was and remained a virgin not just in the narrow physical sense but that she was never tainted by what has afflicted all of mankind, "original sin" – by the unique and exclusive grace of God, a Grace He conferred on no one else, she was never tainted by even the shadow, the thought of sin, a fate that afflicts each and every one in the rest of mankind from the moment of conception. Third, having borne Jesus, and with Jesus becoming progressively identified with God, Mary became *Theotokos*, the "God-bearer"; from this was ascribed an incomparable holiness to her, a unique proximity to God; a proximity and weight that gave her the power to intercede on behalf of devotees with God, her Son.

To begin with the references to Mary are few. Even among Gospels, it is only in the later ones that she begins to acquire the faith and innocence which have since become synonymous with her. *The Encyclopaedia of Religion* sketches this evolution well.[10] "The Gospel of Mark (written about AD 70) describes Jesus' mother and brothers on the edge of a crowd listening to him teach (*Mk.* 3:31-35)," it recalls. "'His own' (3:20), likely 'his family' have come to take him away because Jesus was, they thought, 'beside himself'; they are like the hostile scribes who claim that he is 'possessed by Beelzebub' (3:22). In Mark 3:34-35, Jesus designates as 'my mother and my brothers' those who do the will of God, thus contrasting his natural family, including Mary, with his 'eschatological family' of disciples. The passage in Mark 6:1-6a, about the rejection of Jesus in his home synagogue, does nothing to change this picture of Mary and Jesus' brothers as sharing the unbelief of those of the surrounding countryside...."[11] From Matthew onwards the cleansing begins. To take a typical example, *The Encyclopaedia of Religion* records, "In the scene of Jesus' eschatological family (*Mt.* 12:46-50) *no reference is made to Jesus' natural family coming to take custody of him.* In the synagogue scene at Nazareth (*Mt.* 13:53-58), Matthew *drops out the Marcan reference to 'his own relatives'* in what Jesus says (12:57; cf. *Mk.* 6:4)."[12] By the time we get to Luke, Mary is well on the way to becoming a repository of faith and innocence, even of being the "favoured one". The predictable alterations are made: thus, says this review, "The rejection scene at Nazareth (*Lk.* 4:16-30) is presented very differently, and the saying about Jesus' eschatological family (*Lk.* 8:19-21) lacks any contrast with his natural family...."[13]

What *The Encyclopaedia* characterizes as "cascading piety" proceeds. Even till the third century, Mary is not an

[10] *The Encyclopaedia of Religion*, Volume IX, Mircea Eliade, Editor in Chief, Macmillan, New York, 1987, pp. 249-52.
[11] *Ibid.*, p. 250. [12] *Ibid.* [13] *Ibid.*

object of veneration. At the Council of Ephesus in AD 431, she is proclaimed *Theotokos*, "God-bearer". As the centuries pass, she graduates from being one who was fortuitously chosen to bear God to one who is the Mother of God. By 1854, the Pope proclaims it to be a dogma to which every believer must subscribe that "the most blessed Virgin Mary, from the first moment of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege of Almighty God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, Saviour of the human race, was preserved free from all stain of original sin...."

The cult of Mary is among the most potent in Christianity. In Kerala today one can see her idols at every turn – in chapels, alongside roads, with passers-by praying to them, making offerings as to any other idol.

Scholars see in this cult the continuation of earlier, pagan goddess-cults. Thus, *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* observes,

> Non-Christian sources are instructive in tracing parallels to the cult of Mary. Virgin Birth stories (e.g., Hera, Rhea, Silvia, Brigid) were circulated in other cultures, as were tales of mothers mourning lost and deceased children (e.g., Demeter and Persephone; Isis and Horus). Iconographically, just as Mary was often portrayed holding or nursing the infant Jesus, so too was the Egyptian goddess Isis depicted suckling her infant son, Horus. Even as Mary was called Queen of Heaven and sometimes depicted as surrounded by the zodiac and other symbols, so too were the deities Isis, Magna Mater, and Artemis.
>
> Such parallels show that Mary's cult had roots in the cults of female deities of the Greco-Roman pantheon, cults ultimately eradicated by Christianity....[14]

Mircea Eliade's *Encyclopaedia* notes not just these parallels but another one as well – a continuation in the cult of Mary of the patriarchal fear of female sexuality. Having emphasized

[14] *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, Bruce M. Metzger, Michael D. Coogan, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1993, p. 500.

how "Mary eventually became the repository of all the lingering images of the goddesses," it turns to the incompleteness and remarks,

> ....Although many Christians have continued to worship Mary as God, few have questioned the patriarchal fear of female (and ultimately all) sexuality implicit in her title as virgin. Until and unless the virginity of Mary is recognized in the ancient sense as the power of regeneration and renewal that is expressed in sexuality, Mary, like Artemis and Athena, will remain a truncated image of the goddess.[15]

The Church, of course, insists that the conception of Mary, that the Christian's worship of Mary and her idols is altogether different from run-of-the-mill idolatry of ignorant, superstitious heathens like us. "Mary is the spiritual mother of all living," reports *The Catholic Encyclopaedia Dictionary*. "Catholics venerate her with an honour above that accorded to other saints...., but different from the divine worship given to God only; they pray to her, and she in Heaven intercedes with her son, God the Son, for them. Recognizing that Mary is a creature and that all her dignity comes from God, *devotion to her is far removed from the idolatry which prejudice has sometimes associated with it....*"[16]

But, as it turns out, this idolatry, this getting perilously close to us heathens is one of the lesser consequences. From the second century onwards a formidable dispute arose from this attribution of immaculate conception to Mary. Every descendant of Adam carries the consequence of his alienation from God, of the "original sin." This consequence is cleansed in the case of every individual only by the death of Jesus on the Cross. It is in this sense that Jesus dies for the sins of all mankind. But, if Mary never had the taint of original sin, she was never in need of Jesus' redemption, and so Jesus did not die for her sins. Thereby, the theologians reasoned,

[15] *The Encylopaedia of Religion*, Volume XV, *op. cit.*, p. 278.

[16] *The Catholic Encyclopaedia Dictionary*, Donald Attwater, Editor, Cassell, London, 1949, p. 310.

her relationship with God's grace was less than full and perfect. This reasoning was countered with great ardour. Mary had been preserved from the taint of sin, it was argued, by the same death of Jesus on the Cross – except that in her case it was an *anticipatory* saving! Notice how the devout scholar puts it in the *Chambers's Encyclopaedia,* notice in particular how what is just a series of assertions, of assumptions suddenly become a "fact":

> ....As every other human being, Mary stood in need of redemption and could be redeemed only by the death of Christ; and only from the merits of that death, *seen in anticipation,* does the unique grace and favour of her immaculate conception derive. Because of Adam's sin all his progeny, from the first moment of their existence, have suffered in their whole nature the blight and alienation from God that is original sin. But though Mary inherited the same spiritual liability as all the rest of Adam's children and, for any liberation from it, was dependent on the future sacrifice of the cross, that liability was, nevertheless, in the solitary case of the mother of God, not realised: whereas the rest of mankind have, by the saving merits won on the cross, been cleansed of the taint of original sin, Mary, by those same merits, was preserved from the taint; and God so provided that there was never an instant in her existence when her soul was actually, in any degree, under the domination of sin and less than perfectly united to him through grace. The doctrine of the immaculate conception is the Roman Catholic Church's *statement of this fact* and of its relation to the divine plan for the salvation of all of Adam's descendants....[17]

The Encyclopedia Americana amplifies the thesis, and faults those who down the centuries have seen theological problems in it. *The Encyclopaedia* observes,

> ...Their denials stemmed not from anything explicit in the sources of revelation, but from three basically speculative objections:

Notice how the matter is already wound round a circularity:

[17] *Chambers's Encyclopaedia,* Volume VII, International Learning Systems, London, 1973, p. 390.

the touchstone is that there should be something "explicit in the sources of revelation" – but trusting "the sources of revelation" is no more than one of those "matters of faith"! And notice too how the objections of the other person are "speculative" while one's own speculations are facts – being based on something explicit in those sources of revelation! However, to continue, the "speculative objections" are:

> (1) The strange notion that original sin was transmitted, as it were physically, by concupiscence in generation; since Mary was naturally conceived, she must have contracted it, they thought. (2) The notion that the souls had to be first infused, and only then sanctified; they failed to realize that it [the soul] could be sanctified simultaneously with its infusion. (3) They thought that if Mary had no sin, she could not be redeemed; they did not see that redemption could consist in preservation from contracting sin, instead of liberation from sin already contracted. The solution to these difficulties came largely from the Franciscan school...."[18]

Which element in this string of assertions can be "proven" in any sense of the term? That there is something called "original sin"? That it cannot be transmitted "by concupiscence in generation"? That there is a soul? That it can be "sanctified" without being "infused"? That sanctification can consist of anticipatory preservation from sin rather than merely of being cleansed of it *ex post facto*? Which element in the argument is any more than yet another leap of faith? Yet, strung together, they are proclaimed to be a "solution"!

"The popes added also an argument of fittingness," *The Encyclopedia Americana* adds, "that it would be strange if the Mother of God were not exempt from all sin."[19] God impregnates Mary with Jesus *via* a mis-translation. Jesus becomes God by the steps we have seen. Thus, from being the one who was impregnated by God, Mary becomes the Mother of God. As she is the Mother of God, "it would be

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[18] *The Encyclopedia Americana*, Volume XIV, Americana Corporation, New York, 1969, p. 712.

[19] *Ibid.*

strange if she were not exempt from all sin." And this is proclaimed to be "an argument of fittingness"!

What of the Quran which using the very same "argument of fittingness" asserts that Jesus was not the Son of God? For Allah says, "It is not befitting to (the majesty of) Allah that He should beget a son....", and that anyone who alleges that Jesus was the Son of God is guilty of blasphemy?[20] In which of these mutually exclusive "arguments of fittingness" should one put his faith? For one man's fittingness is the other man's blasphemy.

And there is the other problem – one that springs from the Gospels themselves. We have two propositions: that Jesus was born to a virgin, and, second, that she remained a virgin throughout her life. Each proposition is called into question by the plain text of the Gospels themselves.

Matthew is describing the visit of the angel to Joseph. The angel dispels the doubts which have erupted in Joseph's mind about marrying Mary who is already pregnant. He marries her. How does Matthew describe their subsequent relationship?

> Then Joseph being raised from sleep did as the angel of the Lord had bidden him, and took unto him his wife:
> And knew her not *till she had brought forth her firstborn son*.[21]

The clear implication being that after the birth of the child, he came to "know her".

Jesus is claimed to be the Son of God – not just figuratively, not just because of his spiritual or other attainments, but literally in that it was the Holy Spirit which, by "coming upon"

[20] *Quran*, 19.35. Commenting on the verse Abdullah Yusuf Ali remarks, "Begetting a son is a physical act depending on the needs of man's animal nature. Allah Most High is independent of all needs, and it is derogatory to Him to attribute such an act to Him. It is merely a relic of pagan and anthropomorphic materialist superstitions." Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Quran*, Amana Corporation, Brentwood, 1994 reprint, p. 751, footnote 2487.

[21] *Matthew*, 1.24-25.

Mary, led to his being conceived. As he was the only one who was so conceived, he naturally had no sibling. But, in fact, the Gospels speak of the brothers of Jesus as well as of his sisters. Though the sisters are referred to collectively, the brothers are even named. Jesus has returned to Nazareth. He teaches. He does mighty works. The people are wonder-struck. "Is not this the carpenter's son?," they ask, "Is his mother not called Mary? And his brethren, James and Joses, and Simon and Judas? And his sisters, are they not all with us? Whence then hath this man all these things....?"[22] As Jesus was born to a virgin, as Mary remained a virgin through the birth and throughout the rest of her life, how do these others become Jesus' brothers and sisters?

No explanation has come up that would preserve the notion that all statements contained in the Gospels are simultaneously and literally true: they were in fact cousins, runs one set of "explanations", they were in fact children of Joseph from an earlier marriage, runs another set....

Many among the faithful have become so attached to Mary that their devotion to her has long been a problem for the Church. It has campaigned against idolatry, but Mary's devotees have all along been fervent idolaters! It has insisted that no one should be put at par with Jesus, but for the devotees of Mary she is at least at par with him, in any event she is closer, more accessible! And so numerous have been the members of the cult, so intense their devotion that the cult could not just be brushed aside. Yet to accept it in totality.... The Church has wrestled: seeking to minimize the cult in one thrust, to accommodate it in the next, to assimilate, and then incorporate, and finally to appropriate it in the subsequent ones. The tension continues to this day, it sticks out in one of the fundamental decrees of Vatican-II – *Lumen Gentium*, the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*. Passage after passage in it seems to have been put in to qualify the one that precedes it!

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[22]*Matthew*, 13.55-56; *Mark*, 6.3.

The Council reiterated that Mary was and remained "ever Virgin," that Jesus' conception was "virginal", that the birth of Jesus also "did not diminish his mother's virginal integrity but sanctified it." It declared her to be "truly the Mother of God and the redeemer," the "Mother of the Son of God, and therefore.... also the beloved daughter of the Father and the temple of the Holy Spirit."[23] The centuries-old dilemma – if she had always been and remained free of sin, she clearly was not in need of redemption by Jesus' death – elicited from the Council the same centuries-old assertion: "Because of this gift of sublime grace," the Council declared, "she far surpasses all creatures, both in heaven and on earth. But, being of the race of Adam, she is at the same time also united to all those who are to be saved; indeed, 'she is clearly the mother of the members of Christ.... since she has by her charity joined in bringing about the birth of believers in the Church, who are members of its head.' Wherefore she is hailed as pre-eminent and as a wholly unique member of the Church, and as its type and outstanding model in faith and charity...."[24] The Council declared that there had been a purpose to God's sending the redeemer through Mary, a woman: as the downfall had been occasioned by a woman, God decided that a woman should contribute to life. Hence, "the knot of Eve's disobedience was untied by Mary's obedience," the Council cited earlier authorities to have established.[25]

These were of course the old, familiar assertions. The point was about the cult. What should be the attitude of the Church towards it? Assertion followed by caveat followed by assertion....

"In the words of the Apostle there is but one mediator: 'for there is but one God and one mediator of God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself a redemption for all'

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[23] *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, 21 November, 1964, 52, 57.
[24] *Ibid.*, 52. [25] *Ibid.*, 56.

(1 Tim. 2:5-6)," the Council began. "*But* Mary's function as mother of men in no way obscures or diminishes this unique mediation of Christ, but rather shows its power. *But* the Blessed Virgin's salutary influence on men originates not in any inner necessity but in the disposition of God. It flows from the super-abundance of the merits of Christ, rests on his mediation, depends entirely on it and draws all its power from it. It does not hinder in any way the immediate union of the faithful with Christ but on the contrary fosters it."[26] A subordinate, dependent role and power, in other words – but one secured by nothing more than a string of dogmatic assertions.

Of course, she continues to intercede for the faithful, of course "her manifold intercession continues to bring us the gifts of eternal salvation," the Council decreed, and for this reason the Church honours her with titles such as "Advocate, Helper, Benefactress, and Mediatrix." "This, however, is so understood," it emphasized, "that it neither takes away anything from nor adds anything to the dignity and efficacy of Christ the one mediator."[27]

The Council held that the cult of Mary be "generously fostered," only to have to add, "But it strongly urges theologians and preachers of the Word of God to be careful to refrain as much from false exaggeration as from too summary an attitude in considering the special dignity of the Mother of God...."[28]

What we see in the case of Mary is an unvarying sequence. Atheists, monotheists, those professing hatred for idolatry smash idols. The new cult becomes idolatry of the one who led them to smash the original idols. Soon, he seems too distant, too forbidding. "Saints" round and about him seem more accessible, more humane. They come in first as intercessors with him. Soon, they become intercessors, along with the founder of the cult, with the ultimate God, and

[26] *Ibid.*, 60. [27] *Ibid.*, 60, 62. [28] *Ibid.*, 67.

therefore objects of worship in their own right. And in little time their cult becomes a rival to the cult of the founder....

And soon the cult of the supposed "saint" becomes the cult of the supposed relics of the supposed saint. And that becomes a gold mine for the Church....

The Book they have, and we don't

13

Truth keeps pace with need!

One euphemism recurs all the time in the writings of Biblical scholars: "theological". The writer of the Gospel adopted Bethlehem as the birthplace of Jesus, they say, for "theological objectives". John ascribed such and such words to Jesus, and Luke and Matthew some others for "theological reasons", they say. This Gospel emphasized miracles, while that one hardly mentions them for "theological reasons", they say.

Dictionaries tell us that theology is "the science of God". But choosing Bethlehem rather than Nazareth as the place where to locate the birth of Jesus, choosing 25 December as the day of his birth, putting one set of words in his mouth as he is dying rather than some other words, ascribing miracles or not doing so – what has this to do with "the science of God"?

In plain words, words which these scholars shy from using, the result of their inquiries is the following: to create and sustain the new cult, the apostles and, even more so, once it became the custodian and main beneficiary of that cult, the Church needed to show certain events to have occurred, certain words to have been spoken; need ensured supply, accounts of the events took the content which was required, words materialized which would be most helpful. This impulse of the evangelists and the Church is what scholars mean when they talk of the "theological reasons" that led the supposed author to advance some account, or that led the Church to put one construction on what that had written rather than some other.

"In post-Biblical Judaism of the first Christian centuries," we are told in the *Macropaedia*, "it was believed that the spirit had ceased after the writing of the Book of Malachi (the last book of the Old Testament canon) and that no longer could anyone say, 'Thus sayeth the Lord,' as had the Prophets, nor could any further Holy Writ be produced...."[1] No problem: assert that the Spirit is working through Jesus.

But not all that is necessary and useful for the Church has been said by Jesus. No problem: have him as "a living presence" who is – after his death – providing those words.

But as many come to claim to be receiving guidance from that "living presence", a great variety of sayings and accounts surface. Not all are convenient. Not all can be harmonized. How should one wrest exclusive authority for the Church, how can one ensure that the only imprimatur that will count will be that of the Church? No problem: project the Church as the body of Christ, in the alternate as his bride, and make it a mark of being Christian that the person believe that it is in and through the Church that the Spirit – of Jesus, and therefore of God – is now working.

Legends and words that have congealed in the Old Testament are what have been internalized by the people, they are what have a hold over the imagination of the people. No problem: show the new cult as, not the rival or replacement of the existing one but as its culmination, the New Testament not as the rival or replacement of the Old but as its fulfillment. Show again and again that Jesus is doing the things, that he has the attributes, that he is proclaiming the words which the Old Testament had said the new prophet shall do and say. So intense is the anxiety in this regard that it yields an embarrassing pattern. Ever so often events occur which could well have gone some other way, ever so often Jesus puts himself into situations – including the climactic events which lead to his crucifixion in the end – which he

[1] *Encyclopaedia Britannica, Macropaedia*, Volume XIV, p. 961.

could have side-stepped, and the explanation, to recall the phrase that occurs almost a dozen times in Matthew, is, "This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet...." Had someone in the Old Testament forecast what was going to happen, or were the events being brought about so that some prophecy be fulfilled? The words in the Gospels certainly suggest the latter – so strong was the compulsion behind the accounts that it breaks through the text.

But conflict with Judaic authorities intensifies. Prudence dictates that the Romans be kept in good humour. Soon, prospects open up in Rome. No problem: shift the guilt for killing Jesus more and more on to the Jews, and water down the responsibility of Pontius Pilate.

As people hearken back to David – even though next to nothing is known about him, even though much in the legend is not altogether edifying – David's career has all the standard ingredients of Old Testament careers: adultery, murder, family squabbles, the single-minded pursuit of dominion – it is necessary to claim that Jesus is a descendant of David. No problem: genealogies arrive, the birth takes place, one way or another, in what people have come to regard as the hometown of David.

The prophecy in Isaiah has got wrongly translated – "a young woman" has become a "virgin". No problem: Jesus is born to a virgin without the intercession of the Joseph through whom he is the descendant of David.

And make adjustments where necessary. Jewish lore forecasts that a "Son of Man" shall come down riding clouds – radiant, in the full glory of triumph. Jesus is spoken of as that Son of Man. But he is put to so much suffering. No problem: the Gospels adjust the characterization a bit, and speak of the "*suffering* Son of Man".

As Jesus is the prophet, he cannot but have foreseen his own suffering. So, he is recalled to have forecast it many times. Soon, the Romans too begin persecuting the Christians. No problem: Jesus is now seen to have foretold this

persecution, to have enjoined on Christians the duty to hold out, and to have forecast that in the end they would prevail. The *Book of Revelation* comes about to fill this need....

Constructions tailored to need

Like all messianic prophets, Jesus too thought that the new era was at the brink of breaking out. The Kingdom of God is imminent, he proclaimed. It is set to break out within the lifetime of those who are hearing this message, he said. This expectation which he expressed so often has, of course, been a source of major embarrassment to the Church, and the missionaries in general. They have tried to deflect the matter by maintaining that Jesus did not really mean to specify any chronological date. They point to the answer he gave the Pharisees as they asked him when this Kingdom of God he kept talking about would in fact break out in the world. "The Kingdom of God cometh not with observation," he said, "Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, Lo there!, for, behold, the Kingdom of God is within you."[2]

Two elementary considerations will help us gauge the weight we should place on explanations of this sort.

First, notice the expression on which the explanation rests: "the Kingdom of God is within you." It turns out that this is just one variant. The *Good News Bible* notes that the words are the Kingdom of God "is within you; *or* is among you; *or* will suddenly appear among you."[3] In another copy of the Bible which is before me the expression is, "the Kingdom of God is in the midst of you." The very Church which today tries to explain away Jesus' forecast by making out that he was talking of a Kingdom *within* us, that very Church has used the alternate expressions, "is among you," "is in the midst of you," to bolster the notion that it – the Church – is central: the

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[2] *Luke*, 17.20-21.

[3] *Good News Bible, Today's English Version,* The Bible Society of India, Bangalore, The New Testament, p. 103, footnote 'u'.

Kingdom of God, it has taught, is wherever the faithful are gathered – as it is in the Church that they are gathered, it is where the Kingdom of God prevails!

Second, recall an example from the current apologia on behalf of Islam. For centuries a specific, murderous construction has been placed on the exhortations to *jihad*, for centuries that particular construction has been the rationalization for war and pillage. But today, in countries like India where Islam is not in power, the apologists insist that what Allah and the Prophet had intended when they talked of *jihad* was an inner-directed struggle against the evil tendencies that lurk in each one of us! The Kingdom of God is to be within each of us – exactly as *jihad*, after centuries of annihilation and pillage, is to be waged within each of us!

How justified are missionaries in contriving such explanations? What exactly is Jesus reported by the Gospels themselves to have said? What did his direct disciples understand him to have meant?

Jesus has gathered his twelve disciples. He is instructing them how they are to conduct themselves as they carry his message from house to house, from city to city. He tells them of the opposition they are liable to encounter, how those who oppose them shall soon meet retribution at the hands of God...., how they must not lose heart, how, instead, they must persevere, and at the same time be prudent: "....And ye shall be hated of all men for my name's sake," he tells them, "but he that endureth to the end shall be saved." "But when they persecute you in this city, flee ye into another: for verily I say unto you, *Ye shall not have gone over the cities of Israel, till the Son of man may be come*" – that is, they would scarcely have gone through the cities of Israel – a very small number in a very small area – and he would have returned a second time.[4]

The imprisoned John hears of what Jesus is doing. He

[4] *Matthew*, 10.22-23.

sends two of his disciples to inquire of him, "Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?" – the query itself is an embarrassment, coming as it does from the very John who had proclaimed the coming of Jesus, upon whose baptizing Jesus not only did the heavens open, and the voice from heaven resound, "Thou art my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased,"[5] this is the one about whom at that moment John the Baptist himself said, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it abode upon him.... And I saw, and bare record that this is the Son of God ."[6]

In any event, what is Jesus' answer? "Go and shew John again those things which ye do hear and see," he tells the Baptist's disciples. "The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them."[7] The very signs that Isaiah had prophesied shall testify that the Kingdom of God has arrived: for we are told in Isaiah, "Say to them that are of a fearful heart, Be strong, fear not: behold, your God will come with vengeance, even God with a recompence; he will come and save you. Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing: for in the wilderness shall waters break out, and streams in the desert. And the parched ground shall become a pool, and the thirsty lands springs of water...."[8]

Jesus has had exchanges with his disciples about who the people think he is, and who they – the disciples – think he is. He has been telling them how, in accordance with the plan of God, he must go to Jerusalem, how he will have to undergo much suffering, how he will eventually be killed, how he shall rise on the third day. The disciples protest. Jesus teaches them how they are to look upon the suffering he will be

[5]*Mark*, 1.10-11.
[6]*John*, 1.32, 34.
[7]*Matthew* 11.3-6.
[8]*Isaiah*, 35.4-10.

undergoing. But that whole period will not last long, he assures them. Neither the period of his travails, nor the period of his being away from them. *"Verily I say unto you,"* Jesus teaches them, *"There be some standing here, which shall not taste of death, till they see the Son of man coming in his Kingdom"* – that is, the Kingdom of God shall come to prevail within the lifetime of some of those who are conversing with him then and there.[9]

Jesus has come out of the Temple – at that time the symbol as much of the prevailing religion as of permanence. He tells his disciples, "See ye not all these things? Verily I say unto you, There shall not be left here one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down." He goes on to tell them of the signs of the last days. And those days are not far off, he warns them. "Now learn a parable of the fig tree," he says. "When a branch is yet tender, and putteth forth leaves, ye know that summer is nigh. So likewise ye, when ye shall see all these things, know that it is near, even at the doors. *Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled."*

What no one but God knows is the precise moment when those catastrophic events which are to precede the second coming may break out; for that reason, the watchword of each must be, "Watch", be ready at all times – that is, do not delay for a moment conducting yourselves in accordance with the message.[10] But that indefiniteness relates only to the moment at which the catastrophic events, and thereafter the Kingdom of God will break out – not to the fact that that entire sequence is going to commence and be completed within the lifetime of those standing in front of Jesus and conversing with him.

The forecast – that the Kingdom of God is imminent as can be – as much as the sequence of events which shall precede

[9] *Matthew*, 16.28.
[10] *Matthew*, 24, and 25; in particular, 24.32-34; 25.13.

it are set out in Mark as explicity. This Gospel also states repeatedly that the Kingdom of God is at hand. John the Baptist has just been arrested. Jesus commences his ministry. He declares, "The time has come, and the Kingdom of God is at hand,...."[11] Jesus tells the disciples, *"Verily I say unto you, That there be some of those that stand here, which shall not taste of death, till they have seen the Kingdom of God come with power."*[12] And again, *"Verily I say unto you, that this generation shall not pass, till all these things be done."*[13] As in Matthew, all that is uncertain is the precise moment when in the near future all this may break out:

> For the Son of man is as a man taking a far journey, who left his house, and gave authority to his servants, and to every man his work, and commanded the porter to watch.
> Watch ye therefore: for ye know not when the master of the house cometh, at even, or at mid-night, or at the cock-crowing, or in the morning:
> Lest coming suddenly he find you sleeping.
> And what I say unto you I say unto all, Watch.[14]

So certain is Jesus that the Kingdom of God is just about to break out that he says, "I will drink no more of the fruit of the vine until I drink it new in the Kingdom of God."[15]

And in Luke too – the Gospel in which that passage about the Kingdom of God being within us occurs – Jesus declares,

> *But I tell you of a truth, there be some standing here, which shall not taste of death, till they see the Kingdom of God.*[16]

Moreover, this imminence is what the immediate disciples of Jesus understood from what he had been telling them. Jesus has been telling them of the dramatic events that are about to be enacted in Jerusalem soon. They are approaching Jerusalem. They have seen him go to the house

[11] *Mark*, 1.15.
[12] *Mark*, 9.1.
[13] *Mark*, 13.30.
[14] *Mark*, 13.34-37.
[15] *Mark*, 14.25.
[16] *Luke*, 9.27.

of Zacchaeus, a rich man whom many regard as a sinner. They have heard Jesus tell him, "This day is salvation come unto this house ." "And as they heard these things," Luke tells us, "he [Jesus] added a parable, because he was nigh to Jerusalem, *and because they thought that the Kingdom of God should immediately appear.*"[17]

In a word, contrary to what our missionaries say now, the Kingdom of God was something external, something that was to break out outside of the believers and disciples, and it was to break out within the lifetime of some of those who were then present: within fifty-sixty years of Jesus' death. Not quite what has transpired.

In announcing the imminent arrival of the Kingdom of God, Jesus was true to type: all prophets have forecast an imminent overturning – the imminent Day of Judgment, *qayamat* in the case of Muhammad, the imminent collapse of Capitalism in the case of Marx.... This imminence is the major solace they offer for holding out a little longer, it is the reason they give for embracing their new creed forthwith, for repenting immediately. But Jesus was true to type not only in that he too, like every other prophet, proclaimed this imminent outbreak, he was true to type also in that, as in the case of every other prophet, his forecast failed to materialize. Jesus came and went. The generation within whose lifetime the Kingdom was to break out, that too passed away. Seventy-eighty generations have come and gone since. And still no Kingdom, still the same prayer "Thy Kingdom come" some time in the future!

The solution? A new interpretation at every turn! A new device at every turn to explain away the forecast, including interpolation and over-writing! *The Cambridge Companion* gives an example: having recalled the assurances that the Kingdom of God would break out soon, it remarks,

[17] *Luke*, 19.11.

> We can see in the biblical tradition that this outlook causes problems, especially when the fulfillment of the hopes of the group does not occur on schedule. For example, the promise of Israel's renewal in the space of seventy years expressed by Jeremiah (Jer. 25:11, 29:10) is revised by Daniel to seventy 'weeks' of years, or 490 years (Dan. 9:1-27). In the Gospel tradition, and in other parts of Christian scriptures, there is evidence that with the passage of time the expectation of an imminent end of the age had to be dealt with, and a variety of solutions were offered.[18]

This "variety of solutions" – mark the word "solutions", as if these devices actually solve the problem! – have ranged all the way from declaring the sayings which contained the forecasts to be spurious, to reading altogether novel meanings into the words. What Jesus meant by his assurances that he would come again is not that some thing external to us would happen, theologians and scholars now try to make the faithful believe, his assurance is that whenever we surrender to him, he comes to us.... Interpolation and over-writing too have been deployed in the interests of the faith.[19]

But what are mere scholars in comparison with the Church?! An even more inventive solution comes from the Vatican! In *Somemni hac liturgia, The Credo of the People of God*, the Pope turns to explaining the Church's immersion in the improvement of the secular lives of adherents, in that some of its members are working for social justice and the like. He remarks, "We likewise confess that the Kingdom of God, which had its beginnings here on earth in the Church of Christ" – notice the typical superimposition, the substitution: the Kingdom of God had its beginnings not in Christ, not in his preaching, not in his miracles, not even in his ministry as a

[18]Howard C. Kee, Eric M. Meyers, John Rogerson, Anthony J. Saldarini, *The Cambridge Companion to the Bible*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997, p. 446.

[19]For instance, *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, Bruce M. Metzger, Michael D. Coogan, editors, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1993, pp. 685-86.

whole, but in the "Church of Christ"! – "is not of this world, whose form is passing, and that its authentic development cannot be measured by the progress of civilization, of science or of technology" – a blatant evasion: forget science and technology, did the Kingdom of God *on the criteria Jesus had in mind* when he said that it would come to pass before some of those who were hearing him had passed away, has the Kingdom *on those criteria* come any nearer to being realized? But to proceed with the construction that the Church now puts on those forecasts,

> The true growth of the Kingdom of God consists in *an ever deepening knowledge of the unfathomable riches of Christ, in ever stronger hope in eternal blessings, in an ever more fervent response to the love of God, and in an ever more generous acceptance of grace and holiness by men*. But it is the same love that induces the Church to promote persistently the true temporal welfare of men. Although she does not cease to warn her children that here they have no abiding city, she urges them to improve their own human conditions within the limits of their own state of life and possibilities....[20]

The explanation for immersion in secular struggles, etc., apart; the question whether the Church has signed up in such struggles because it has believed that they flow from Jesus' teaching and life or because there was no other way to convince people that it was relevant to their lives, that question apart; the matter of concern for us at the moment is the construction which is put on the "Kingdom of God." And that is a novelty – the assertion that this Kingdom "consists in *an ever deepening knowledge of the unfathomable riches of Christ, in ever stronger hope in eternal blessings, in an ever more fervent response to the love of God, and in an ever more generous acceptance of grace and holiness by men*."

[20]Pope Paul VI, *Solemni hac liturgia, The Credo of the People of God*, 30 June, 1968.

Now, from whom, and by whose activities do these things – "an ever deepening knowledge of the unfathomable riches of Christ, [an] ever stronger hope in eternal blessings, ...an ever more fervent response to the love of God, and.... an ever more generous acceptance of grace and holiness by men" – flow? From the Church, from what it is doing.

What is the evidence, therefore, that the Kingdom of God is nearing? The fact that the Kingdom *of the Church* is expanding!

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Dictated? Inspired? Written? Collated? Edited?

Potential converts in India are still fed the line that the Bible – specially the Gospels, of course – is a divine book which was dictated by God. That used to be the claim of the Church in Europe also – but it was abandoned long ago. A lesser claim was then advanced: that while the Old and New Testaments were written by humans, by mortals, at the time these authors wrote them they were under the inspiration of God. They were a sort of passive hand that was used by the Holy Spirit to set out the narrative. *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* describes the current status of this assertion as follows:

> Today all but the most extreme Jewish and Christian fundamentalists recognise the complicated and heterogeneous origins of the Bible and that it contains statements that in any other literary work would be considered erroneous. Modern biblical criticism has immeasurably enriched our understanding of biblical backgrounds, customs, and mores, but it has inevitably raised other issues. Most modern believers acknowledge that in the end the issue of biblical inspiration is ultimately a mystery – truly a matter of faith.[1]

So much of an understatement as to be misleading, we shall soon see. But even such euphemisms serve to awaken us to the reality behind the figure-of-faith rationalization that we encountered earlier: the figure of faith rests on accounts accepting the authenticity of which itself is "a matter of faith"! Double-storeyed faith, so to say.

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[1] *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, Bruce M. Metzger, Michael D. Coogan, editors, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1993, p. 304.

The next climb-down was the assertion that, even if God did not dictate the narrative, even if we set aside the inspiration-theory, the narratives were penned down by eyewitnesses, by followers of Jesus who saw the events themselves, who heard Jesus, who conversed with him. This assertion is repeated today only in countries like India – countries in which it has been possible to keep the laity completely shut-off from the results of Biblical scholarship. All one need do is pick up any of the standard *Companions to the Bible,* any of the scores and scores of books containing the results of Biblical research, any of the standard encyclopedias, and open the entries on the Bible, on Biblical analysis or criticism, on the Old or New Testament. They set out how the Old and New Testament are now regarded as "residues" or "precipitates" of centuries of collating, editing, sifting.

The accumulation of the Old Testament

Far from the Old Testament being the result of a one-time revelation or dictation by God, as the potential targets are told in India, scholars freely acknowledge today that it is the precipitate, the residual accumulation over a millennia. This is how *The Cambridge Companion to the Bible* summarizes the process:

> The change from oral to written forms involved extensive editing of older material, as well as arranging it in the present patterns in which it is preserved in our Biblical books. In addition to the weaving of narratives into a consecutive epic form, the present form of the first five books of the Bible shows clearly that the material has been compiled and expanded over a period of centuries and in a variety of circumstances.... The heavy underscoring of the ritual aspects of the law in the period covered by the Pentateuch is a sure sign that in its final editing, the hand of the priestly leaders of Israel was at work reshaping the tradition.

This fact suggests at least two of the major motivations that were at

work in this recasting of the Biblical tradition: (1) to bring the tradition up to date, so that its relevance for the present situation in the life of Israel is immediately apparent; (2) to harmonize or blend diverse traditions to provide an overall unity to the tradition as finally recorded. This process is also evident in the historical and prophetic materials. The Books of Chronicles, for example, when compared with the accounts of the same events in the Books of Kings, show that the values and point of view of the priests of the period after Israel's return from exile in Babylon have had a shaping effect on the Chronicler's version of Israel's history. Also, in the period after the exile, traces of Persian ideas appear in Biblical writings, such as the notion of Satan as God's adversary. In the case of the prophets of Israel, earlier predictions which did not take place as expected are balanced by the addition of later material. For example, the prophecies of the eighth-century BCE prophet Isaiah that predict God's punishment of his disobedient people are supplemented by predictions about the end of the age (*Isa.* 24-7) and then later by reports and celebrations of Israel's return to the land (*Isa.* 36-9) and hopes for the future fulfillment of God's purposes for his renewed people (*Isa.* 40-66). Less obviously, but just as significantly, other prophetic writings received later supplements, as is the case with Amos, Zechariah, and Malachi....[2]

A thoroughly conventional process, carried through by ordinary individuals to fulfill thoroughly conventional objectives. The identical sequence transpired not just in the writing and gathering of the Gospels, but also in the final selection of 27 books that today constitute the New Testament.

How the Gospels grew, and were sifted

Scholars freely acknowledge that the Gospels grew bit by bit over 125 years, that the New Testament as a whole – with its 27 books – did not assume the shape it has today till the 4th century after Christ:

[2]H.C. Kee, E.M. Meyers, John Rogerson, A. J. Saldarini, *The Cambridge Companion to the Bible*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997, p. 10.

> The New Testament consists of 27 books, which are the residue, or precipitate, out of many 1st-2nd-century-AD writings that Christian groups considered sacred.... In a seemingly circuitous interplay between the historical and theological processes, the church selected these 27 writings as normative for its life and teachings....[3] The Gospel literature represents the crystallization or 'precipitation' in writing of the oral tradition about Jesus, his life, teaching, death, and resurrection....[4]

Within a century or so of Jesus' departure, over a score of gospels got written, and an even larger number of "letters" attributed to assorted Apostles, books of Acts, of Revelation. Several of these could not be harmonized with others. Marcion, for instance, maintained that the fact that the Old Testament did not agree in all particulars with what had been subsequently revealed to Jesus showed that the former had originated from some lesser god; on this premise he produced a version of the scriptures from which all traces of Old Testament prophecies, sayings, doctrines were excised.[5] Clearly, this premise could not be squared with what Matthew, etc., had tried to do: their entire effort had been to establish that Jesus was the fulfillment of the prophecies of the Old Testament. The Gnostics and their works presented a challenge of an altogether different kind. It isn't so much that they held creation, existence, the body, relationships like marriage, activities like procreation all to be evil. Of greater concern to the Church was what they declared to be the way out of this swamp of evil: direct perception by the soul of its own nature. If individuals could pursue this way directly, on their own, if the ultimate referent was not to be conformity to some text or decree but direct experience of reality, where would that leave the authority of the Church?

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[3] *Encylopaedia Britannica, Macropaedia,* Volume XIV, p. 961.

[4] *The Encyclopedia Americana,* Volume III, p. 702.

[5] A Gnostic, Marcion flourished in the 2nd century AD. He was repudiated by the Church Fathers, and left Rome.

Individuals began sifting this pile to prepare a standardized list of texts which alone would have scriptural status: Justin, a philosopher; Irenaeus, a bishop; Clement of Alexandria; later Origen, the first of Biblical scholars, also from Alexandria. Neither the criteria different authorities used nor the lists they arrived at were always the same. Eventually, as late as the 4th century, the list of 27 works came to be accepted by most sections of the Church. Gospels which differed from the ones that had been selected were destroyed. When they surfaced later – sometimes because someone had hidden some of them – they were put down as apocryphical. The process of sifting, excluding, destroying was a conventional process, an iterative one, one dictated by the needs of the Church at that time.

The justification was circular: we have not endowed authority to these particular works, it was asserted; we have merely recognized the authority which was inherent in them. Clearly, the scholars and clerics had as individuals selected some works for inclusion and excluded others, and they had been guided in doing so by what each thought would be useful for conventional purposes: for advancing the line they thought would best help propagate the message, for meeting the needs of the community – for instance, the themes which would motivate believers to hold on in the face of persecution. A conventional selection by conventional processes by individuals. The Church had an explanation around this obvious fact: true, individuals made the selection, it conceded; true, they selected some and excluded other works in response to specific needs; but, it maintained, it is God who put those needs in the way of the new community, and then guided those individuals to that particular set!

And that explanation passes muster even today. Having acknowledged that "the Christians did not and do not agree among themselves as to which books compose their canon," *The Cambridge Companion to the Bible* says,

....The decisions about canonicity rested on three factors: (1) what had proved useful in the Christian communities; (2) what could be traced back to the earliest times of the church; (3) what could be shown to have been written by an apostle or an apostolic associate.... The primary considerations in assembling the canon, therefore, were the needs, the experience, and the corporate judgments of the early Christian communities. The decisions did not derive from objective criteria offered by detached observers. In the process of deciding what writings would constitute the Bible, both Jewish and Christian decision makers demonstrated the conviction held by the Biblical writers themselves: that God addresses his people, calling them to account and disclosing his purpose for and through them, and that this takes place in the living context of social and cultural crisis and change.[6]

Scholarship has also completely debunked the notion of the supposed authors of the Gospels having been eyewitnesses to the events. In fact, it is now commonly accepted that the material developed in three or four stages: as bits and pieces repeated orally from person to person; as bits and pieces reduced to writing, and being handed around as unrelated "fragments"; of their being put together in various collections; of the entire corpus being winnowed, edited, combined, sifted into a number of gospel-like accounts; of the nascent church finally selecting the 27 books – including the four Gospels – and anointing them as the New Testament. In almost every case, the gospel was originally put together anonymously, and only later was it ascribed to some figure who had been prominent in the past. Today there is no agreement whatsoever on who "Mark," "Matthew", "Luke" or "John" was. Witness the entries about them in the *Macropaedia*, and the *Oxford* and *Cambridge* companions.

In regard to "Mark" we are instructed, "Though the author of Mark is probably unknown, authority is traditionally

[6] *The Cambridge Companion to the Bible, op. cit.*, pp. 11, 573.

derived from a supposed connection with the Apostle Peter...."[7] After recounting the attribution to someone connected with Peter, *The Oxford Companion* records, "Traditionally, he has been identified with John Mark mentioned in *Acts* 12.12, but the latter was associated with Paul and Barnabas, not Peter (*Acts* 12.25; 5.37,39; *Col.* 4.10; 2 *Tim.* 4.11), and the name 'Mark' was one of the most common in the ancient world."[8] Similarly, after recounting who the Mark who is mentioned on several occasions in the *Acts* and *Letters* might have been, *The Cambridge Companion* says, "But the writing that now bears his name seems to have been compiled from oral and written sources which consisted of small units of tradition from several sources. It does not have the strict narrative sequence one might expect from a report of a firsthand observer (such as Peter) of Jesus' public life...."[9]

What about "Matthew"? "Although there is a Matthew named among the various lists of Jesus' disciples," the *Macropaedia* informs us, "more telling is the fact that the name of Levi, the tax collector who in Mark became a follower of Jesus, in Matthew is changed to Matthew. It would appear from this that Matthew was claiming apostolic authority for his Gospel through this device but that the author of Matthew is probably anonymous.... The Gospel grew out of a 'school' led by a man with considerable knowledge of Jewish ways of teaching and interpretation. This is suggested by the many ways in which Matthew is related to Judaism. It is in some ways the most 'Jewish' Gospel. Striking are 11 'formula quotations' ('This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet....') claiming the fulfillment of Old Testament messianic prophecies."[10] Similarly, we learn in *The Oxford Companion*, "It is

[7] *Encyclopaedia Britannica, Macropaedia*, Volume XIV, p. 973.
[8] *The Oxford Companion to the Bible, op. cit.*, p. 493.
[9] *The Cambridge Companion to the Bible, op. cit.*, pp. 455-56.
[10] *Encyclopaedia Britannica, Macropaedia*, Volume XIV, p. 975.

commonly held that Matthew was written about 85 or 90 CE by an unknown Christian who was at home in a church located in Antioch of Syria.... Although the apostle Matthew may have been active in founding the church in which the gospel story attributed to him arose (9.9; 10.3), it is unlikely that he was the author. On the contrary, that author exhibits a theological outlook, command of Greek, and rabbinic training that suggest that he was a Jewish-Christian of the second rather than the first generation (cf. 13.52). Also, Antioch of Syria commends itself as the place where he may have been at home, because the social conditions reflected in his story correspond with those that seem to have prevailed there: the city was Greek-speaking, urban, prosperous, and it had a large population of both Jews and gentiles."[11] "This Gospel is anonymous, like the others," *The Cambridge Companion* says. "When the church in the second century sought to lend authority to its Gospels, it assigned each of them to an apostle or an associate of an apostle. About 130, Papias attributed this Gospel to Matthew (who seems also to have been known as Levi; cf. Matt. 9:9 and Mark 2:13) and claimed that he wrote it in Hebrew. But its author used the Greek Gospel of Mark as a source, and the many scriptural quotations are from the Greek translation rather than directly from the Hebrew Bible. Although we cannot determine who the author was, careful analysis shows us what his concerns were and on what basis he modified and expanded the Gospel tradition.... For convenience we refer to the author and his Gospel as Matthew."[12] *The Cambridge Companion* proceeds to give a sketch of the structure and method of Matthew, and, when it comes to one of the principal messages of this particular Gospel, remarks, "...In Jesus' sketch for his people's responsibility to God in this Gospel there is a distinctive emphasis on true righteousness, in contrast to that of the Pharisaic tradition (3:15; 5:6, 10, 20; 6:1, 33). That theme is

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[11] *The Oxford Companion to the Bible, op. cit.*, pp. 502-03.
[12] *The Cambridge Companion to the Bible, op. cit.*, pp. 502-03.

most fully developed in a discourse section that does not fit the pattern sketched above in our outline and that *may have been added to an earlier form of the gospel as the hostility between* Matthew*'s community and the Pharisees intensified* (Matt. 23)."[13]

And "Luke"? He has been taken to be a physician who accompanied Paul on his journeys: the hypothesis is based on allusions in some sources to his having been a companion or follower of Paul, and on the supposition that Luke's language is laced with medical imagery. Can even this much be maintained about him with any confidence?

"References are often made to Luke's medical language," says the *Macropaedia,* "but there is no evidence of such language beyond that to which any educated Greek might have been exposed. Of more import is the fact that in the writings of Luke specifically Pauline ideas are significantly missing; while Paul speaks of the death of Christ, Luke speaks rather of the suffering, and there are other differing and discrepant ideas on law and eschatology. In short, the author of this Gospel remains unknown." The other embarrassing fact is that while this Gospel is supposed to be the "most historical" of the four, it is evident that "the writer had no accurate idea of its [Palestine's] geography."[14] *The Oxford Companion's* observations are to the same effect: "Unlike the Pauline letters, which bear the Apostle's name, the third Gospel is anonymous, as are the other gospels. Ancient church tradition attributed the third Gospel to Luke.... the 'beloved physician'.... Most modern commentators on the Lucan Gospel, however, are skeptical about the validity of this traditional attribution.... [Reasons for this skepticism follow in the volume.] The result is that many modern commentators are uncertain about the authorship of Luke-Acts."[15] *The Cambridge Companion* too recounts the various

[13] *The Cambridge Companion to the Bible, op. cit.*, p. 504.
[14] *Encyclopaedia Britannica, Macropaedia,* Volume XIV, p. 976.
[15] *The Oxford Companion to the Bible, op. cit.*, p. 470.

personages with which "Luke" has been sought to be identified, the uncertainties surrounding such identifications, and then concludes, "More likely, the author, as he tells us in Luke 1:1-2, was not an eye-witness of the events he reports but based his account on reports he had heard or read from those who were. For convenience, we refer to him as Luke, but as is the case with the other gospels, the identity of the author is simply unknown, and probably has been from the earliest years of the document's existence."[16]

And the final one, "John"? After listing allusions to more Johns than one in Greek sources, the *Macropaedia* observes, "Because both external and internal evidence are doubtful, a working hypothesis is that John and the Johannian letters were written and edited somewhere in the East (perhaps Ephesus) as the product of a 'school', or Johannian circle, at the end of the 1st century...."[17] *The Oxford Companion* says that though, given its dramatic structure, John's Gospel displays a literary unity, in the Gospel "there are some features that suggest it was composed and in edited stages." It lists the surprising breaks in the narrative, the switches from one locale to another in the middle of incidents, the jumps in language and style, the repetition of material, and seeks to explain these features by the hypothesis that "behind the composition of the Gospel lie a number of different sources, recording the signs, the teaching, and the passion of Jesus, that have been combined and edited at various stages in the writing of this document, until its final publication as a unified work...."[18] "Although we do not know who wrote this anonymous work," *The Cambridge Companion* writes in regard to the Gospel attributed to "John", "the frequent references to 'the disciple Jesus loved' (13:23-5; 19:26-7; 20:2-8; 21:7, 20) and the fact that such a person seems to be identifying himself as the one who recorded this Jesus

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[16] *Encyclopaedia Britannica, The Cambridge Companion to the Bible*, *op. cit.*, pp. 519-20.

[17] *Macropaedia*, Volume XIV, p. 977.

[18] *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, *op. cit.*, pp. 374-75.

material led many in the early church to the conclusion that the gospel was written by John, the son of Zebedee (*Mark 1:19*), although he is never mentioned by name in the gospel. The reference in 21:22 to the possibility that this disciple might live until Jesus returned to earth led some to suppose that he was writing at a greatly advanced age, perhaps late in the first century. But these are no more than ancient guesses....”[19]

In regard to the Gospel attributed to “John”, the authors proceed to note further that “The language of this gospel is disarmingly simple Greek. But the symbolic strategy of the author, with the focus on timeless meaning rather than merely reports of what happened, and the fact that in many narrative and teaching details this gospel differs widely from the other gospels, suggest that it was written by someone who later became a follower of Jesus, not an eyewitness.”[20]

Turning to the other work which is attributed to the same John, *The Cambridge Companion* observes, “In sharp contrast to the Gospel of John, the Revelation of John is written in thoroughly apocalyptic style, and its major interest is never touched on in the Gospel of John: the political and cosmic conflict between the Roman Empire and the people of God, which is soon to culminate in the final battle between God and the powers of evil. The confrontation which is shaping up between the church and the empire, with their incompatible claims to the divinity of Christ and of the emperor, is the distinctive focus of the author of Revelation.”[21]

Bits and pieces from here and there

Summarising the position, *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* states,

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[19] *The Cambridge Companion to the Bible, op. cit.*, p. 539.
[20] *Ibid.*, p. 540.
[21] *Ibid.*, p. 540.

> Classical Biblical criticism has been much interested in matters of authorship. The Pentateuch was not written by Moses himself; the Book of Isaiah contains materials from a time long after that prophet lived; the Gospels were not necessarily written by the disciples whose names they bear. This realisation at once changes our picture of the sort of book the Bible is: it is not a once-for-all, divinely dictated report but a product of a tradition developed over some time within communities of faith. Relations between documents like the synoptic gospels [That is, the first three Gospels.] are literary relations, involving revision, change of emphasis, selection, and theological difference. The feature of pseudepigraphy must be recognized as a fact: that is, that books may be written in the name of, and attributed to, some great person of the past who presides over that genre....[22]

And *The Cambridge Companion* concludes,

> ....In a conscious or unconscious attempt to lend authority to these writings, the accounts of the life and teachings of Jesus, although preserved in anonymous documents known as the gospels, came to be associated with disciples of Jesus (Matthew and John) or with associates of the disciples or apostles (Mark, said to be Peter's companion, and Luke, associated with the apostle Paul). The place of origin of the Gospels cannot now be determined, but Matthew became the central document in Rome; John was linked with Ephesus; Mark, with Alexandria. In Acts Luke demonstrates close knowledge of Asia Minor and Greece, but this gospel writer and historian may have come from any city in Syria, Asia Minor, Greece, or Italy. The apostolic link was crucial to the authority of writings: later documents were written in the name of an apostle (such as the later letters attributed to Paul) and anonymous writings were attributed to an apostle (as Hebrews was assigned to Paul). Since there were no official copies of the writings – either Jewish or Christian – it was inevitable that they would be modified by those who copied or used them. Additions and adaptations were made, such as harmonizing differences in the gospel accounts of Jesus.... Furthermore, insertions from one gospel to another were made in copying the documents,

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[22] *The Oxford Companion to the Bible, op. cit.*, p. 319.

and passages were added in some copies of a gospel, such as the story of the adulterous woman in John 8....[23]

How very far all this is from the "dictated-by-God," "written-under-the-direct-inspiration-of-God," "written by eyewitnesses" fables that are fed to our illiterate tribals!

Far from any scholar today thinking of the Gospels as having been written at one go by one author, much less dictated by God, etc., most now accept that the Gospels were put together bit by bit. At first some stories – about miracles, sayings, parables, events – were handed down orally. These were reduced individually to written fragments. These were collated over decades into single volumes. There are variations in the texts which have survived. When we approach the Gospels as we now know them, there seem to have been two primary collections to begin with: what is Mark's Gospel and a collection of sayings of Jesus which can today only be inferred from the existing Gospels – this latter source is referred to as "Q", the initial of the German word for source, *Quelle*. Matthew seems to have taken the structure and narrative of Mark, and woven the sayings from "Q" into that sequence: almost 600 of the 661 verses in Mark, the scholars tell us, figure in Matthew; and he added some material from other sources unique to him. Luke is taken to have done the same: he too used Mark and "Q", and some source unique to him.

John's version is traced to an even wider variety of sources and influences: "Various backgrounds for John have been suggested," the *Macropaedia* reports, and proceeds to list some of them: "Greek philosophy (especially the Stoic concept of the *logos*, or 'word', as immanent reason); the works of Philo of Alexandria, in which there is an impersonal *logos* concept that can not be the object of faith and love; Hermetic writings, comprising esoteric, magical works from

[23] *The Cambridge Companion to the Bible, op. cit.*, pp. 570-71.

Egypt (2nd-3rd centuries AD) that contain both Greek and Oriental speculations on monotheistic religion and the revelation of God; Gnosticism, a 2nd-century religious movement that emphasized salvation through knowledge and a metaphysical dualism; Mandaeanism, a form of Gnosticism based on Iranian, Babylonian, Egyptian, and Jewish sources; and Palestinian Judaism, from which both Hellenistic and Jewish ideas came. In the last source there is a Wisdom component and some ideas that possibly came from Qumran, such as dualism of good versus evil, truth versus falsehood, and light versus darkness. Of these backgrounds, perhaps, all have played a part, but the last appears to fit John best...."[24]

The last – the Dead Sea Scrolls found in, among other places, Qumran – is a particularly telling source. The Scrolls are said to have been written between 100 BC and AD 70. Much before the birth of Jesus they talk of a "teacher of Righteousness", those who wrote them lived in the expectation that such a person would perform miracles like healing the sick and resurrecting the dead, that he shall bring good tidings to the meek, that he will shepherd them, that the opponents "shall slay the Prince of the congregation by piercing." The Scrolls depict a community, *The Encyclopedia Americana* reports, "awaiting the advent of a royal Messiah (the Anointed One), a scion of David, and of a priestly Messiah, a scion of Aaron," and so on.[25] That such notions, indeed the very phrases predate Jesus and the Gospels by as much as a hundred years has created predictable consternation in the Church since 1947 when the Scrolls were discovered. For the question has naturally risen: can it be that such legends and messianic expectations were in common currency in the Middle East at the time, and were projected on to Jesus? The embarrassment has been

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[24] *Encyclopaedia Britannica, Macropaedia*, Volume XIV, p. 977.
[25] *The Encyclopedia Americana*, Volume VIII, p. 555.

compounded by the extraordinary efforts the Church made for decades to totally restrict access to the manuscripts. Some argue that the inference that the Scrolls anticipate notions central to Christianity is based on wrong readings.[26] Others have little hesitation in acknowledging that a Gospel such as that of John is marked by elements which seem to have their roots in the Qumran texts. Thus, while adducing reasons for the view that John drew on a number of Christian sources independently of the other three Gospels, *The Oxford Companion* states,

> .... the evidence from the Dead Sea Scrolls has shown that before the common era a literary setting existed in which Jewish and Greek religious ideas were combined in a manner that was once thought to be unique to John and of a late, second century CE, date. The scrolls now make it clear that John may well have derived from Qumran itself his language of 'truth,' 'knowledge,' 'wisdom,' and 'faith,' as well as his theological conviction that life is a struggle between truth and perversity, the sons of light and the sons of darkness, good and evil, in which God will ultimately prevail....[27]

Far from divine dictation, etc., where is even the uniqueness in that case?

[26] For instance, *The Encyclopedia Americana*, Volume VIII, p. 555.
[27] *The Oxford Companion to the Bible, op. cit.*, p. 374.

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All to a predetermined purpose

In the initial period the stories and accounts which now figure in the Gospels were handed down orally. No group among the followers has been identified as having consisted of persons who had specialized in memorizing passages or sequences of events. The stories were entirely at the vicissitudes of, to recall Will Durant's felicitous description, the "illiterate memories" of devotees, they were at the mercy of the "illiterate memories" of beleaguered devotees. Eventually, the material was reduced to written form. But no "autograph," as it is called, that is no original manuscript has survived. For three hundred years scholars have been trying to construct the "stemma" of such manuscripts as have survived. Much has been pinpointed as a result. But as Helmut Koester correctly points out, there are at least two sets of difficulties that are well-nigh insurmountable. The first is that there is an inherent limit to what can be achieved by going from one manuscript to what seems to be a preceding text:

> The limitations of purely text-historical procedure in working with classical Greek and Latin texts should not be ignored in N[ew] T[estament] textual criticism. The reconstruction of a stemma leads back to archetypes of first editions, but not necessarily to the original text. Even the most successful reconstruction of archetypes in NT textual criticism gives no more than information about the forms of the texts which were in existence at the end of II CE. Like the classical philologian, the NT textual scholar also has to remember that textual corruptions can be more severe during the first decades of the transmission, that is, between the period between the autograph and

first edition. Such corruptions can be more severe in the very first years than in subsequent centuries, no matter whether our oldest manuscript witness comes from the Middle Ages or from III CE. It does not make much difference how many manuscripts written since the end of II CE have been preserved, since not a single manuscript provides us with a direct insight into the history of the text during the first fifty to one hundred years after the writing of the autograph.[1]

The second difficulty arises from the fact that we are dealing with a period when manuscripts were being copied by hand – by persons of varying ability, of varying fidelity, by persons who must have had at least as firm a conviction as the "authors" of the originals that they should be passing on that, and only that which will spread and deepen what they regarded as the correct faith. Even a brief passage from Koester gives us a glimpse of the resulting uncertainty:

> There are numerous examples of alterations and corruptions of the autographs of N[ew] T[estament] writings during the earliest period of transmission. These problems cannot be solved with conventional text-critical methods, but require the aid of literary criticism.... The edition of the Gospel of Mark which was used by Matthew and Luke, for example, was substantially different from the Gospel of Mark we know as transmitted in all texts and manuscripts. In the Gospel of John, a redactor made several additions to an earlier work (the most significant is John 6:52-59). In the compilation of the writings which the manuscripts transmit as 2 Corinthians, the editor had combined a number of smaller letters of Paul to produce this major epistle; the same seems to be the case with Philippians. How severely such additions and redactions could alter the original text is demonstrated in Marcion's edition of the Pauline letters – and Marcion had no intention but to restore the original text of Paul's writings. Also instructive is the example of 2 Peter, which, written in II CE, incorporated the entire letter of Jude in a new edition (2 Peter 2). More directly related to textual criticism proper are the cases in which

[1]Helmut Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament*, Volume II, *History and Literature of Early Christianity*, de Gruyter, Berlin and New York, 1982, p. 41.

> the text of a passage had become so corrupt that the scribe had no choice but to reconstruct hypothetically whatever he thought might have been the original, or cases of deliberate corrections in order to adjust a text to a new theological perspective. Marginal notes were also brought into the text accidentally in a number of cases. A particular difficulty is the text of the Book of Acts, which is preserved in Codex D in a textual form which so radically departs from the texts of the other manuscripts that it has been surmised that at its base was a second revised edition made by the book's original author. In all these instances, the textual critic must turn to a hypothetical reconstruction (conjecture), for which there may be at least some justification in the uncertainty of the manuscript tradition, but never support from an actual manuscript reading....[2]

This being the position, a host of difficulties erupt. After all, what was the rationalization that the Church advanced as scholars and reformers started focusing on the discrepancies in the Gospels? These couldn't all be true simultaneously, on every event at least one of the Gospels was in manifest error. The Church began maintaining that the inerrancy it had claimed was for the original "autographs" – that is, what those four – the number itself is an assumption – had written with their own hands was what was divinely protected from error. And, alas!, those originals were nowhere to be found! As *The Oxford Companion* explains, "only the now non-existent autographs, or original manuscripts, are deemed inerrant; all admit that the later copies contain errors."[3]

That sort of an *ex post* adjustment of the sails only generates fresh questions. Why would God, having divinely protected the original manuscripts from error, have allowed His sacred word to be corrupted by mere copyists in the subsequent copies? Having gone to the trouble of transmitting the original message, and having expended care to ensure that the transcribers would take it down without

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[2] Koester, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

[3] *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, Bruce M. Metzger, Michael D. Coogan, editors, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1993, p. 303.

error, why would God have allowed the originals to be lost?

These difficulties are compounded by the way the original four composite-, or anonymous authors put their Gospels together. As scholars freely acknowledge, they did not view their task as one of writing history. Their aim was the edification of the people, it was the advancement of Christianity, at times the advancement of some particular way of looking at the events which the author or compiler felt was the one that would benefit people the most. They freely acknowledged as much, and so do scholars today. "The primary sources for our knowledge of Jesus, therefore, are the gospels: the Books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John," *The Cambridge Companion* remarks after noting the extreme paucity of references to Jesus in records other than these gospels. "But as the title 'gospel' (good news) implies, and as the opening word of Mark makes explicit, *they are not objective reports but propaganda*. That is, they want to convince the reader of the truth of what they describe, as Luke makes explicit: 'That you may know the truth concerning the things of which you have been informed' (*Lk.* 1:4)...."[4] It could have added several other passages from other Gospels. What does John himself say about the things he has set down?, to take one instance: "And many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book: But these are written, *that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God: and that believing ye might have life through his name*."[5] The author-compiler is himself telling us that he has sifted material, that he has selected some events and left out others, and that in doing so he has had in mind a specific purpose.

This process by which the early accounts were put together bears an embarrassing similarity to the way later

[4] H.C. Kee, E.M. Meyers, John Rogerson, A.J. Saldarini, *The Cambridge Companion to the Bible*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997, p. 447.

[5] *John*, 20.30-31.

on *Hadis* came to be manufactured: as Goldziher and others were to show, manufacturing *hadis* which would advance the cause of Allah and His Messenger came to be regarded as an act of piety that would secure favour from Allah – these scholars characterized this process as a "pious fraud". What do scholars say about the Gospels? While commending the conservatism of the liturgical and other traditions through which the material was preserved, the *Macropaedia* is constrained to note, "But because the church perceived its risen Lord as a living Lord, *even his words could be adjusted or adapted to fit specific church needs*. Towards the end of the 1st century, there was also *a conscious production of gospels*. Some gospels purported to be the words of the risen Lord that did not reflect apostolic traditions and even claimed superiority over them. Such claims were deemed heretical and helped to push the early church toward canonization...."[6]

In fact, as we have seen the original four – if that was the number – had themselves been no less committed while propagating particular versions, they had selected and used the events of Jesus' life or his sayings and teachings for specific purposes. Again, the *Macropaedia*'s authors give a telling illustration:

> The postulated common saying source of Matthew and Luke, Q, would account for much verbatim agreement of Matthew and Luke when they include sayings absent from Mark. The fact that the sayings are used in different ways or different contexts in Matthew and Luke is an indication of *a somewhat free way in which the editors could take material and mold it to their given situations and needs*. An example of this is the parable in Matthew and Luke about the lost sheep (Matt. 18:10-14; Luke 15:3-7.) The basic material has been used in different ways. In Matthew, the context is church discipline – how a brother in Christ who has lapsed or who is in danger of doing so is to be gently and graciously dealt with – and Matthew shapes it accordingly (the sheep has 'gone astray'). In Luke, the parable exemplifies Jesus' attitude toward sinners and is

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[6] *Encyclopaedia Britannica, Macropaedia*, Volume XIV, pp. 961-62.

directed against the critical Pharisees and scribes who object to Jesus' contact with sinners and outsiders (the sheep is 'lost').

Another example of two passages used verbatim in Luke and Matthew is Jesus' lament over Jerusalem. In Luke (13:34-35; the lament over Jerusalem) Jesus refers to how they will cry 'Blessed be the King who comes in the name of the Lord' when he enters Jerusalem. (Lk. 19:38). In Luke, the passage is structured into the life of Jesus and refers to his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.' In Matthew (23:37-39) this same lament is placed after the entry into the city (21:9) and thus refers to the fall of Jerusalem and the Last Judgment. Apparently, Luke has historicized a primarily eschatological saying.[7]

Mark's Gospel seems to be the oldest, *The Cambridge Companion to the Bible* notes as do others. Those of Matthew and Luke "presuppose the contents and order of Mark," it says, adding *"though each of the other writers modifies Mark in order to fulfill his own special aims."* Furthermore, the *Companion* notes, "Passages in Mark that the church later found difficult [not in the sense of being difficult to comprehend, but in the sense of being inconvenient] are either omitted or basically modified." It gives an example.

Mark, 6, begins with Jesus returning to his own country. It is the Sabbath day. He begins to preach in the synagogue. Listeners are astonished. How come this man has so much knowledge, they wonder, from where does he get this enormous power to work such wondrous things? Is he not the son of that carpenter, Joseph, is he not the brother of....? Jesus says unto them, "A prophet is not without honour, but in his own country, and among his own kin, and in his own house." So far so good: the words have become a part of common vocabulary. But the Gospel is not done with the incident. Mark continues, "And he could there do no mighty work, save that he laid his hands upon a few sick folk, and healed them. And he marveled at their unbelief. And he went round

[7] *Encyclopaedia Britannica, Macropaedia*, Volume XIV, pp. 972-73.

about the villages, teaching."[8] Now, that is an inconvenience: the passage could be used to put Jesus at par with common magicians – who can work their magic so long as the audience is credulous. Accordingly, *The Cambridge Companion* notes, "Luke completely rewrites and relocates (*Luke*, 4:16-30) this comment, and both he and Matthew eliminate the mention of Jesus' inability (*Matt.* 13:58)...."[9]

The effect is in itself magic. Recall that Mark had written, "And he *could do there no mighty work*...." Matthew altered this to read, "*And he did not many mighty works there* because of their unbelief."[10] In Mark Jesus is *unable* to do the miraculous works because the people of his country lack faith in him. In Matthew he *decides* not to do such works – almost as a punishment, it would seem, for their unbelief. Change "could do there no....," into "he did not.... ", and inability becomes authority!

Similarly, recall the anxiety of the evangelists to show that Jesus was the fulfillment of prophecies made in the Old Testament. "There is a formula of fulfillment in which each event is portrayed as having taken place 'in order to fulfill what was spoken of....,' (or similar phraseology) in *Matt.* 2:15, 17-18, 23; 4:14-16; 8:17; 12:17-21; 13:14-15, 35; 24:4-5; 27:9-10," *The Cambridge Companion* recalls. And adds:

> *At times Matthew shapes the quotation to fit his aim*, as in his claim that the scriptures predicted Jesus' living in Nazareth, whereas the Hebrew Bible never mentions Nazareth but has two non-local terms: *nezer*, which refers to a special consecration to God (*Num.* 6:2-21, *Lev.* 21:12), and *netzer*, which means 'shoot' (*Isa.* 11:1, 53:2). Elsewhere Matthew *shapes the events he reports in order to make them fit his understanding of scripture*, as when he describes Jesus riding into Jerusalem on two animals, since two are mentioned in scripture (*Matt.* 21:7, *Zech.* 9:9). The aim is clear, and the method matches that of Jewish interpreters in that period: the interpreter of

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[8] *Mark*, 6.1-6.

[9] *The Cambridge Companion to the Bible, op. cit.*, p. 447.

[10] *Matthew*, 13.58.

scripture is interested in what it means in his own situation, not what it meant in the time of the writer.[11]

Just as changes such as these are effected to prove that Jesus is the fulfillment of what had been prophesied in what had hitherto been the scripture of Jews, when Matthew comes to writing his account of the final events – predictions by Jesus of his imminent death, the betrayal by Judas, the trial, in particular the shifting of guilt on to the Jewish authorities and the Jewish mob, the crucifixion, the conspiracy to put out the story that his disciples have stolen Jesus' body – he again alters his text to fit the circumstances and "needs" of the Christian community at the time of his writing. Regarding Matthew's account of these climactic events, *The Cambridge Companion* remarks, "The basic pattern of the narrative is that of Mark 14-16, but these are significant supplements and changes in detail, *many of which reflect the tensions between the church and Judaism....*"

The subtle alterations continue in the accounts of events that are said to have occurred after Jesus' death. Recounting these, *The Cambridge Companion* remarks,

> ....In this post-resurrection encounter between Jesus and the disciples, the emphasis is on two themes: (1) the authority with which Jesus sends forth his disciples and (2) their obligation to carry out a worldwide program of instruction in the commandments which Jesus has given them. The members of this new community of disciples from all nations are united by the rite of baptism, by the Trinitarian confession with which that rite is performed, and by the members' obedience to Jesus' commands. The combination of community definition over against emergent rabbinic Judaism, of regulations for members' behaviour and for the internal processes of organization, and of prescriptions for liturgical practice *provide clear evidence that the Gospel of Matthew was intended to serve as a constitution for the emerging institution: the church.*[12]

[11] *The Cambridge Companion to the Bible*, *op. cit.*, p. 505.
[12] *Ibid.*, p. 511.

Compared with Mark, Matthew reflects the increasing tensions with the Jews. By the time Luke gets compiled or written, that the Jews will not accept Jesus and the new sect has become evident. Stories are therefore altered and extended to prepare the ground for taking the message to peoples beyond the Jews.[13] John's concern is to provide a channel through which people may commune with, through which they may seek to reach God. Hence his repeated assertions: the way to become sons of God is to put one's faith in the Son God sent us;[14] Jesus was the Word made flesh;[15] no one has ever seen God, it is His only begotten Son who has lived among us, while prophets such as Moses gave us the law, "but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ."[16] In a word, God can only be reached *via* Jesus. Once persecution commenced, the Church was necessarily concerned that believers should not lose heart, that they should not abandon the faith. It became necessary, therefore, to maintain that actually Jesus had forecast both – that they would be subjected to great suffering, and that just as surely they would come out triumphant in the end. We have the appropriate prophecies in Matthew 24, in Luke 17.22-37, in Luke 21.5-28. The *Book of Revelation* is entirely intended to steel believers so that they may hold out and not abandon their faith in Jesus, and therefore in the Church.

The same sort of alterations took place in regard to other features and figures of faith – to recall the instance we have encountered earlier, the picture of Mary got progressively luminescent as she came to be exalted.

So decisively was the text influenced by the message which the author felt ought to be conveyed that it is not possible today to sift what is fact from what is the result of this piety and commitment. Indeed, scholars conclude that the

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[13]For examples of these see, *The Cambridge Companion to the Bible*, *op. cit.*, p. 523.

[14]*John*, 1.12. [15]*John*, 1.14. [16]*John*, 1.17-18.

search is futile. The more committed scholars say it is an irrelevance! Koester summarizes the position:

> The quest for the historical kernel of the stories of the Synoptic narrative materials is very difficult. In fact such a quest is doomed to miss the point of such narratives, because *these stories were all told in the interests of mission, edification, cult, or theology (especially christology), and they have no relationship to the question of historically reliable information.* Precisely those elements and features of such narratives which vividly lead to the climax of the story are derived not from actual historical events, but belong to the form and style of the genres of the several narrative types. Exact statements of names and places are almost always secondary and were often introduced for the first time in the literary stage of the tradition....[17]

One point therefore is that words were ascribed to Jesus which the particular follower felt would advance the cause on the assertion that Jesus, being alive and present, was himself guiding the presenter in alighting on those words and incidents. Next, the individual author/compiler/editor who came later crafted his narrative to achieve a predetermined goal. But of course that was far from being the end. A host of documents, letters, gospels grew up. They espoused, and could be used to advance a variety of viewpoints. The nascent Church winnowed many of them out, and arrived at a standard set – the canon – of 27 "books". Henceforth these were to constitute the New Testament. The Church of course had a rationalization for what it was doing: we are not anointing these documents with authority, the authorities said, we are merely recognizing the authority which already inheres in the documents.

Scholars agree that in fact this process of winnowing some books and anointing others was an altogether human endeavour. Indeed it was a corporate endeavour – in the sense of being the endeavour of a corporation committed to

[17] Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament, op. cit.*, p. 64.

enlarging its market-presence, an endeavour guided by what scholars characterize as "the vital interests of the Church." "One important historical aspect is the perception of the canon of scripture: the canon came about historically and can be understood historically....," *The Oxford Companion* says. "The boundaries of scripture are not something eternally and unchangeably established by God; what scripture included at one time and place was not identical with what it included at another; the study of scripture and the study of church history are not separable."[18] And then follows a typical salvage-effort – one to which we shall return in a moment.

As usual, the Church was quick to find "theological" support for what it had selected as scripture! The original dogma had been that the Spirit had worked through Jesus. After Jesus died and rose, the dogma became that he was a living presence who was still guiding his disciples – and on this premise sayings and stories got to be put about. Soon, the doctrine was advanced that the Church was the new body of Christ. From this it was but a step to the assertion that the Spirit was now working through the Church – hence the claim that in rejecting several documents of equal authenticity and antiquity and canonizing the 27 the Church had been divinely-guided! And therefore the 27 had been selected by God Himself.

At every step the overriding touchstone was what the incident or saying would entail for the interests of the new faith. In practice this soon came to mean the interests of the Church. Scholars acknowledge this time and again. "Because of the theological motifs and presuppositions in the faith of the early church in respect to Jesus," the *Macropaedia* says, "it is difficult to write with certainty an authentic life of Jesus," that "with regard to the Gospels, it has to be considered that *their tradition was formed and collected from the point of view of the faith of the post-Easter church, under the influence*

[18] *The Oxford Companion to the Bible, op. cit.*, pp. 320-21.

of its ideas and ways of thought and in close connection with its vital interests and the ways in which its life found expression...."[19] Both the varying traditions of Jesus' birth, it says, "are to be judged as *legendary variations of the theological theme of Jesus' messiahship....*" "The loose and often differing order of the individual scenes only entitles scholars to speak of a rather ambiguous Galilean period of Jesus' activity....," it says. "Each of these datings [of the final supper]," it says, "*may be theologically motivated.*" "The historical reliability of this account [of the trial of Jesus at the hands of the Jews] has rightly been questioned...." It says there is no need to list other scenes of the Passion as "*they relate more to the theological meaning of Jesus' Passion and are, to a large measure, formed in an edifying cultic manner,*" adding, "even though they refer to events which are certainly historical...." – that last qualifying clause stands as a self-evident truth in need of no proof....[20]

"The historical reliability of the Gospels has been variously estimated," say the authors of *The New Universal Library* entry, "but they bear witness to the tradition of the deeds and words of Jesus *which, however, was handed down less for its historical interest than as the basis of the Christian proclamation of Jesus as the Redeemer.* The records of Jesus were *interpreted* records, so that the recovery of a 'Jesus of history' free from all dogmatic interests is impossible. This does not mean that there was no Jesus of history, but that the real Jesus of history cannot be understood apart from the beliefs about him *in the interests of which the Gospels were written.* It is scarcely possible to abstract from the Gospels a connected narrative of the life and ministry of Jesus...."[21]

"The evangelists, in their use of sources and oral traditions," *The Oxford Companion* informs us, "*shaped them according to their theological interests;* this editorial work is

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[19] *Encyclopaedia Britannica, Macropaedia,* Vol. XXII, p. 336.
[20] *Ibid.*, Volume XXII, pp. 336-46.
[21] *The New Universal Library,* Caxton, London, Volume VII, p. 478.

known as redaction...."[22] Again, "The birth stories in Matthew and Luke are relatively late.... But they contain certain items that go back to earlier tradition. Some of these are clearly theological: Davidic descent, conception through the Holy Spirit while his mother remained a virgin, homage at birth...."[23] And again, "The purpose of the trip [into Jerusalem] is stated in Mark's three passion predictions (8.31; 9.31; 10.33-34). *It is generally agreed that these predictions in their present form are prophecies after the event and therefore reflect a knowledge of the passion story....* But they may well contain an authentic nucleus...."[24] And yet again, "Critical scholarship regards the predictions by Jesus of his own resurrection (*Mark* 8.31; etc.) *as creations of the post-Easter community after the event....*"[25] And so on.

We can now get one answer to the question Gandhiji used to ask of the missionaries. Why do you target the illiterate tribal? Why don't you start with me and Mahadev Desai?, he would ask them. That question is turned around by the missionaries, and their apologists today: you studied in a college run by a Christian organization, did anyone try to convert you?, they demand. The reason they did not target Gandhiji is that he would have immediately sought answers to the sort of questions that spring to mind from even a moment's study of the Bible. That reason is reinforced ten times today: once he starts seriously contemplating so fundamental a change as giving up the religion into which he was born, even a person who has received no more than an average education will come across these difficulties in the Gospels, etc., he will seek answers, and the project of our missionaries will be impeded. How much more convenient to target the innocent tribal!

We can also now see what the basic, foundational deception has been in all missionary effort: they have kept

[22] *The Oxford Companion to the Bible, op. cit.*, p. 356.
[23] *Ibid.*, p. 356. [24] *Ibid.*, p. 359. [25] *Ibid.*, p. 647.

their targeted population entirely in the dark about the results of three hundred years of discourse on the Bible and related matters in Europe and America.

Everyone is so firm about requiring "truth in advertising" in regard to cigarettes. Shouldn't we require some of it in missionary activity too?

Their Almighty improvement over our Gods

16

"I, the Sovereign Lord, Almighty"

"The Hindus are mired in superstition and primitive beliefs. They live in terror of their 330 million gods, cajoling and satiating them. The country is a veritable den of Satan, a perfect example of what Satan does to a people...." Missionary literature is full of such statements. As are the writings of missionary-scholars like Max Muller.[1]

Apart from asserting that the worship of numerous gods is symptom of primitive beliefs, of retarded spiritual evolution, for five hundred years missionaries and committed scholars have heaped calumny on those Gods – they are sinful, they are given to licentious conduct, anyone worshipping such gods cannot but imbibe their predisposition to sin, sex, liquor, and the rest.

By contrast, they have presented their belief in one God – monotheism – as the theological breakthrough *sans* peer. He is One; He is powerful while your gods are powerless; He is pure while your gods are given to drink, deceit, sexual immorality – these were the staples of missionary publications till the mid-fifties. Since then the calumny is put out surreptitiously – to tribals, to the illiterate.

What is the God we find in the Bible? What is so great about His being conceived to be One? What are His concerns? What does He want of His devotees? How does He want them to look upon those of other faiths? Does He display the virtues

[1]For examples from their essays, see my *Missionaries in India, Continuities, Changes, Dilemmas*, ASA, 1994, HarperCollins, 1997, pp. 133-60.

in which missionaries dress Christianity – humility, tolerance, forgiveness, compassion, equanimity?

Large-hearted? [2]

"I, the Sovereign Lord, Almighty," that is His unvarying description of Himself. "I, the Almighty Lord have spoken," that is how He concludes His innumerable curses.

Moses, God's chosen prophet, warns his fellow-Israelites,

> ....When the Lord brings you into this land and you have all you want to eat, make certain that you do not forget the Lord who rescued you from Egypt, where you were slaves. Honour the Lord your God, worship only Him, and make your promises in His name alone. Do not worship other gods, any of the gods of people around you. *If you do worship other gods, the Lord's anger will come against you like fire and will destroy you completely, because the Lord your God, who is present with you, tolerates no rivals.*[3]

Joshua, another of God's chosen prophets, warns the people to the same effect,

> But you may not be able to serve the Lord. He is a holy God and will not forgive your sins. He will tolerate no rivals, and if you leave Him to serve other gods, He will turn against you and punish you. He will destroy you, even though He was good to you before.

The people assure Joshua, "No, we *will* serve the Lord." Joshua alerts them yet again, "You are your own witnesses

[2] For the convenience of the reader citations from the Old Testament are in current English. For this I have used the *Good News Bible, Today's English Version*, American Bible Society, published by the Bible Society of India, Bangalore. Some of the incidents, occasionally a passage also comes up for reference more than once – as it exemplifies different aspects of the matter under discussion. Before he concludes that the citations are repetitious, the reader may recall that it is the Bible which goes round and round the same sort of incidents.

[3] *Deuteronomy*, 6.10-15.

to the fact that you have chosen to serve the Lord." "Yes", they say, "we are witnesses". Upon which the prophet commands,

> Then get rid of those foreign gods that you have, and pledge your loyalty to the Lord, the God of Israel.[4]

Job is lacerated with suffering upon suffering that God has heaped on him. His wail has resounded down the millennia. "Who are you to question My wisdom with your ignorant, empty words?," God demands. You have no right to do so, He tells this poor and good man, for I am more powerful than you are, for you do not know what I know, for all creatures obey Me and not you.[5]

"I am the Lord: there is no other god," He tells those He has chosen to be His people. "I will give you the strength you need, although you do not know Me," He tells them. And why, pray does He decide to give them this strength? "I do this," He declares, "*so that every one from one end of the world to the other may know that I am the Lord and that there is no other god.*" "Turn to Me now and be saved, people all over the world," He admonishes. "I am the only God there is...." "Every one will come and kneel before Me, and vow to be loyal to Me," He declares. "They will say that only through Me are victory and strength to be found," He declares, and adds the warning, "but all who hate Me will suffer disgrace."

"With whom can you compare Me?," He demands. "Is there anyone else like Me?" "Remember this, you sinners," He tells the ones He has chosen, "consider what I have done. Remember what happened long ago; acknowledge that I alone am God and that there is no one else like Me...."[6]

"Who can be compared to Me?," He boasts. "Who would dare challenge Me?" What ruler could oppose Me?"[7] "Who

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[4] *Joshua*, 24.19-23.
[5] *Job*, 38-41.
[6] *Isaiah*, 45. 5-6, 22-24; 46.5,9.
[7] *Jeremiah*, 49.19.

can be compared to Me?," He demands again, lest anyone has missed the boast. "Who would dare challenge Me," "What ruler could oppose Me?"[8]

Is that merely the truth? Or is it a boast born of exclusivity?

His singular concern

He has just one concern. Indeed, it is His singular obsession: that every one acknowledge that He alone is powerful, that He is the only God there is, that every one bow to Him – but to Him alone, that every one makes offerings to Him, that every one sacrifices animals to Him – but to Him alone, that every one obey Him – but Him alone. Having created this infinite universe, Thomas Paine asked, why is He so obsessed with whether this puny man on this puny earth in this one little galaxy out of the infinite number of galaxies that He has created, is or is not worshipping Him and Him alone? Two thousand years have gone by, the Church is yet to tell us why.

In any event, that remains God's singular fixation.

"Do not make idols or set up statues, stone pillars, or carved stones to worship," He warns His chosen people. "I am the Lord your God. Keep the religious festivals and honour the place where I am worshipped. I am the Lord." If you fail to do so, "I will bring disaster on you – incurable diseases and fevers that will make you blind and cause your life to waste away....," your crops will fail, I will have the enemies you hate conquer you.... If after this you still persist in not obeying Me, I will multiply the punishments seven times.... And then seven times.... And then seven times.... And then seven times.... that is, 2,401 times.

"I will destroy your places of worship on the hills," the compassionate, forgiving Father says, "tear down your

[8]*Jeremiah*, 50.44.

incense-altars, and throw your dead bodies on your fallen idols. In utter disgust I will turn your cities into ruins, destroy your places of worship, and refuse to accept your sacrifices. I will destroy your land so completely that the enemies who occupy it will be shocked at the destruction...."[9]

"Never forget the Lord your God or turn to other gods to worship and serve them," Moses warns the chosen people. "If you do, then I warn you today that you will certainly be destroyed. If you do not obey the Lord, then you will be destroyed just like those nations that He is going to destroy as you advance."[10] Worship Him, God's prophet tells the people, do all that He commands, love Him, serve Him with all your heart, obey all His laws. Worship Him alone, he tells them, be faithful to Him, make your promises in His name alone, praise Him.[11] "Do not let yourselves be led away from the Lord to worship and serve other gods," he warns. "If you do, the Lord will become angry with you. He will hold back the rain.... Then you will die there...."[12]

"Today I am giving you the choice between a blessing and a curse," God's chosen prophet tells the people God has set on the path of conquest of non-believers. "A blessing, if you obey the commands of the Lord your God that I am giving you today; but a curse, if you disobey these commands and turn away to worship other gods that you have never worshipped before...."[13]

If you obey Him, you will become greater than every other nation in the world, your barns will be full, the Lord will give you many children, many cattle. But if you disobey Him and worship other gods, evil upon evil will descend on you. The Lord will curse your towns and your fields.... He will bring on you disaster, confusion, trouble, until you are swiftly and completely destroyed. He will bring disease upon disease on

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[9] *Leviticus*, 26.1-2, 14-35.
[10] *Deuteronomy*, 8.20.
[11] *Deuteronomy*, 10.20-21.
[12] *Deuteronomy*, 11. 16-17.
[13] *Deuteronomy*, 11.26-28.

you till there is not one of you left in the land you are about to occupy.... infectious diseases with swelling and fever.... Disasters, no rain.... The Lord will give your enemies victory over you....When they kill you, no one will come to scare the birds and wild animals that will be eating your bodies.... The Lord will send boils on you.... He will make your bodies break out with sores, your bodies will be covered with scabs and itch.... The Lord will make you lose your mind.... Blindness.... Your livestock will be butchered before your eyes.... Your sons and daughters will be given as slaves to foreigners while you look on.... Incurable, painful sores, boils will cover you from head to foot.... Your crops will fail, your trees will be devoured by insects.... your land will be taken from you.... These disasters will be evidence of God's judgment on you and your descendants for ever.... Hunger, thirst, nakedness.... God will send a nation to swoop down on you like an eagle. They will be ruthless and show no mercy to anyone, young or old.... When your enemies are besieging your towns, you will become so desperate for food that you will even eat the children the Lord has given you.... you will all eat your own children.... the mother will secretly eat her new-born child, such will be the hunger the Lord will inflict.... Incurable diseases and horrible epidemics.... And all because you failed to obey Him, and because you failed to honour the wonderful and awesome name of the Lord....[14]

Though He has been so good to them as to have chosen them as His own, the people repeatedly revert to other gods. The Lord God does not wean them back – after all, that would be the easiest thing for Him to do: He is All-powerful, is He not? On the contrary, He orders His prophet, Isaiah, "Make the minds of these people dull, their ears deaf, and their eyes blind, so that they cannot see or hear or understand." And why not? "If they did", this benevolent Father explains, "they might turn to Me and be healed."

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[14] *Deuteronomy*, 28.1-68.

"How long will it be like this, Lord?," his alarmed prophet Isaiah asks. And the Lord declares,

> Until the cities are ruined and empty – until the houses are uninhabited – until the land itself is a desolate waste. I will send the people far away and make the whole land desolate. Even if one person out of ten remains in the land, he too will be destroyed; he will be like the stump of an oak-tree that has been cut down....[15]

Hence, His unvarying rule: "Now, let us settle the matter. You are stained red with sin, but I will wash you clean as snow. Although your stains are deep red, you will be white as wool." But only on one condition, says this forgiving, understanding Father: "If you will only obey Me, you will eat all the good things the land produces. But if you defy Me, you are doomed to die. I, the Lord, have spoken."[16] And what is the essential point on which every one must obey Him? That they honour Him alone, that they set up no rival to Him.

Again and again, and yet again He punishes the people He has chosen to be His own. Again and again they revert to honouring other gods, to worshipping idols. They seek protection from entities other than the Lord who has declared Himself to be the only God. They conclude treaties with persons harbouring other beliefs without asking Him. They follow plans without checking with Him.[17] He sends other nations to punish the people He has chosen as His own. They wreak indescribable devastation. But, having carried out His command and punished His chosen people, these other nations revert to worshipping their traditional gods. He is enraged. He roars:

> Now I will act. I will show how powerful I am. You make worthless plans and everything you do is useless. My spirit is like a fire that will destroy you. You will crumble like rocks burnt to make lime, like

[15] *Isaiah*, 6.10-13.
[16] *Isaiah*, 1.18.
[17] For instance, the people of Judah: *Isaiah*, 30.

> thorns burnt to ashes. Let every one near and far hear what I have done and acknowledge my power.[18]

His prophet amplifies God's announcement:

> ....The Lord is angry with *all* the nations and all their armies. He has condemned them to destruction. Their corpses will not be buried, but will lie there rotting and stinking; and the mountains will be red with blood. The sun, moon, and stars will crumble to dust. The sky will disappear like a scroll being rolled up, and the stars will fall like leaves dropping from a vine or a fig-tree.
>
> The Lord has prepared His sword.... His sword will be covered with blood and fat, like the blood and fat of lambs and goats that are sacrificed. The Lord will offer this sacrifice in the city of Bozrah; He will make this a great slaughter in the land of Edom. The people will fall like wild oxen and young bulls, and the earth will be red with blood covered with fat.
>
> ....The whole country will burn like tar.... The land will lie waste age after age.... Vultures will gather there, one after another....[19]

All this suffering heaped on all nations, why? Because they acknowledged someone else! All this suffering heaped on all humanity, to what purpose? So that all will know My power!

Time passes. The Almighty God has now chosen the young Jeremiah as His new emissary to convey His message to His people. Go and tell them, God commands Jeremiah, that "I will punish my people because they have sinned; they have abandoned Me, have offered sacrifices to other gods, and have made idols and worshipped them...." Jeremiah is reluctant: "Sovereign Lord, I don't know how to speak; I am too young," he pleads. I am afraid, he pleads. To no avail.

And so he goes and repeats the words God has asked him to recite. He repeats God's words verbatim.

"What accusation did your ancestors bring against Me?," God asks His people. "What made them turn away from Me?" – His perennial obsession. "They worshipped worthless idols

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[18] *Isaiah*, 33.10-13.

[19] *Isaiah*, 34.1-15.

and became worthless themselves" – His perennial charge. "They did not care about Me, even though I rescued them from Egypt and led them through the wilderness...." – His perennial lament.

"No other nation has ever changed its gods, even though they were not real," He charges. "But My people have exchanged Me, the God who has brought them honour, for gods that can do nothing for them. And so I command the sky to shake with horror, to be amazed and astonished...."

Notice that nothing but nothing happens except by His will. Notice that there is absolutely nothing which He cannot set right immediately and directly – after all, He is All-powerful. And now consider His answer to the question: who bears the guilt for His chosen people deserting Him?

"Israel, *you* brought this on yourself," He thunders. "You deserted Me, the Lord your God, while I was leading you along the way.... Your own evil will punish you, and your turning from Me will condemn you. You will learn how bitter and wrong it is to abandon Me, the Lord your God, and no longer to remain loyal to Me. I, the Sovereign Lord have spoken." What is His concern? How does He reconcile the fact that the very people He has chosen repeatedly desert Him with it being well within His power to bring about whatever change He desires – in people's minds as much as in any situation? You have "abandoned Me", you have "turned from Me" – are these the words of an All-powerful, Sovereign Lord, or of a self-pitying weakling?

He repeats the grouse again and again: ".... long ago you rejected My authority," He charges, "you refused to obey Me and worship Me...."[20]

Helpless, tormented, the people God has chosen as His own turn to Egypt for succour. This sends God into even greater fury. He now turns on the king of Egypt, on every one there, on the land itself. And what is that man's crime? One,

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[20]For the foregoing, *Jeremiah*, 1.6, 16-17; 2.4-6, 11-12, 17, 19-20.

of course, that God's chosen people, having been driven to death by the sufferings He has hurled at them, have turned to this king ! But they have turned to him, not because the king has lured them, but because God has driven them. Second, the Lord God tells His prophet Ezekiel to tell the king on His behalf, "I am your enemy, you monster crocodile, lying in the river. You say that the Nile is yours and that you made it. I am going to put a hook through your jaw...." The whole land of Egypt will be laid to waste....

To what purpose? "Then all the people of Egypt will know I am the Lord," the Lord God explains. I will scatter them all over. To what purpose? "Then they will know I am the Lord," He explains yet again. Then I will send the people and king of Babylon to crush the king and people of Egypt. They will do so with infinite cruelty. To what purpose? "When I punish Egypt in this way," the Lord God explains, "they will know that I am the Lord."

And this humbling and suffering inflicted upon the king and people of Egypt will teach God's chosen people too – they will see what a weak stick it was that they turned to for help. To what purpose? "Then you [the chosen people will know that I am the Lord...."[21]

So many countless persons put to such extreme suffering just so that they know who is the Lord!

I took Israel as My wife, God says. But she has betrayed Me, He wails, and, like a prostitute, taken in every passing god as her lover, specially Baal. Therefore, God declares,

> My children, plead with your mother – though she is no longer a wife to Me, and I am no longer her husband. Plead with her to stop her adultery and prostitution. If she does not, I will strip her as naked as she was on the day she was born. I will make her a dry and barren land, and she will die of thirst. I will not show mercy to her children; they are the children of a shameless prostitute. She herself said, 'I will

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[21] *Ezekiel*, 29, 30.

> go to my lovers – they will give me food and water, wool and linen, olive-oil and wine.'
> So I am going to fence her in with thorn-bushes, and build a wall to block her way....
> She would never acknowledge that I am the one who gave her the corn, the wine, the olive-oil, and all the silver and gold that she used in the worship of Baal. So at harvest time I will take back My gifts.... I will strip her naked in front of her lovers, and no one will be able to save her from My power....
> So I am going to take her into the desert again; there I will win her back with words of love. I will give back to her the vineyards she had and make Trouble Valley a door of hope. She will respond to Me there as she did when she was young, when she came from Egypt. Then once again she will call Me her husband – she will no longer call Me her Baal. I will never let her speak the name of Baal again....[22]

But He rages on. "They have left Me," He says of His people. "Like a woman who becomes a prostitute, they have given themselves to other gods...."[23] "There is no faithfulness or love in the land," He declares, "and the people do not acknowledge Me as God...." He lists the wrongs they do, the people He has chosen as His own, people who are under His guidance at every turn, people to whom He is sending prophets one after the other.... "My people are doomed," He says, "because they do not acknowledge Me...." They have become prostitutes – taking in other gods as lovers.... They are under the spell of idols....[24]

And so, I will myself attack them like a lion, He declares. "I myself will tear them to pieces and then leave them. When I drag them off, no one will be able to save them. I will abandon My people until they have suffered enough for their sins and come looking for Me. Perhaps in their suffering they will try to find Me."[25]

Who is to blame? As usual, the other party! I am always eager to help them, but look at them, says the Lord God.

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[22] *Hosea*, 2.2-17.
[23] *Hosea*, 4.12.
[24] *Hosea*, 4.1, 6, 12, 17.
[25] *Hosea*, 5.14-15.

My people have defiled themselves by worshipping idols, He says. So much so that "Whenever I want to heal My people Israel and make them prosperous again, all I can see is their wickedness and the evil they do. They cheat one another; they break into houses and steal; they rob people in the streets. It never enters their heads that I will remember all this evil; but their sins surround them, and I cannot avoid seeing them."

"In spite of everything that has happened," the Sovereign Lord God laments, "they have not returned to Me, the Lord their God...." And so, "They are doomed! They have left Me and rebelled against Me. They will be destroyed. I wanted to save them, but their worship of Me was false.... Even though I was the One who brought them up and made them strong, they plotted against Me. They keep on turning against Me to a god that is powerless. They are unreliable as a crooked bow...."[26]

What would you say of a father whose singular obsession is that his children pay him obeisance? Who punishes them so cruelly – just to remind them that he has the power to hurt them?

The only arguments that work

At every turn, the people God has chosen, as much as the people He has chosen to punish the chosen ones are reverting to other gods, to idols. And so, at every turn, the Lord God is swept into rage. He declares that He shall destroy the people, that He shall let no mercy, no plea restrain His hand.

His chosen people revert to other gods. He commands that total destruction be visited upon them. He sets the neighbouring nations to destroy His chosen people. Devastation ensues. But these neighbouring people are no

[26] *Hosea*, 7.1-2, 10, 13-15.

less prompt in reverting to their gods. He now pronounces *them* to be wicked, ungrateful, and swears to uproot them completely. The chosen people now feel relieved – they have been freed from the oppression that the neighbours had heaped on them. But, no sooner is oppression lifted, they forget the Lord God. God is again driven to fury: "These evil people have refused to obey Me," He declares. "They have been as stubborn and wicked as ever, and have worshipped and served other gods.... I did this [freed them from oppression] so that they would be My people and would bring praise and honour to My name; but they would not obey Me."[27]

Hence, He vows to wreak total destruction once again, adding, "No pity, compassion, or mercy will stop Me from killing them."[28]

"Even if Moses and Samuel were standing here pleading with Me, I would not show these people any mercy," God tells Jeremiah. "Make them go away; make them get out of My sight. When they ask you where they should go, tell them that I have said:

> Some are doomed to die by disease –
> that's where they will go!
> Others are doomed to die in war –
> that's where they will go!
> Some are doomed to die of starvation –
> that's where they will go!
> Others are doomed to be taken away as prisoners –
> that's where they will go!

I, the Lord have decided that four terrible things will happen to them: they will be killed in war; their bodies will be dragged off by dogs; birds will eat them, and wild animals will devour what is left over...."

As usual, He reverts to recounting the sin for which He is

[27] *Jeremiah*, 12.8-11.

[28] *Jeremiah*, 12.14-17; 13.8-14.

punishing them. And to recounting the punishments He has inflicted – He does so always with pride at His great prowess to wreak unbearable suffering, and simultaneously with a show of regret that He has been forced to inflict the havoc. "*You people* have rejected Me," He says, "*you* have turned your backs on Me. *So* I stretched My hand and crushed you because I was tired of controlling My anger." And so, My hand forced,

> In every town in the land
> I threw you to the wind like straw.
> I destroyed you, My people,
> I killed your children
> because you did not stop your evil ways.
> There are more widows in your land
> than grains of sand by the sea.
> I killed your young men in their prime
> and made their mothers suffer.
> I suddenly struck them with anguish and terror.
> The mother who lost her seven children has fainted,
> gasping for breath.
> Her daylight has turned to darkness;
> she is disgraced and sick at heart.
> I will let your enemies kill
> those of you who are still alive.
> I, the Lord have spoken.

He warns the prophet not to have any children in that land: "I will tell you what is going to happen to the children who are born here and to their parents. They will die of terrible diseases, and no one will mourn for them or bury them. their bodies will lie like piles of manure on the ground. They will be killed in war or die of starvation, and their bodies will be food for the birds and the wild animals." All this torment for what crime? "...because they have defiled My land with idols that are as lifeless as corpses," the Lord God Almighty explains, "and have filled it with their false gods."[29]

[29] *Jeremiah*, 15.1-9; 16.1-4, 18.

"Bring on your plagues, death!," He commands. "Bring on your destruction, world of the dead! I will no longer have pity on this people. Even though [His chosen people] Israel flourishes like weeds, I will send a hot east wind from the desert, and it will dry up their springs and wells. It will take away everything of value. Samaria must be punished for rebelling against Me. Her people will die in war; babies will be dashed to the ground, and pregnant women will be ripped open...."[30]

Such is the reason which sends Him into fury. Such the suffering He inflicts. Such His determination.

Is there no way to persuade Him to hold back His wrath? There is one way, and one alone: confess faith in Me, He says, destroy those idols, erase other gods, humble yourselves before Me.

You unfaithful lot, He says, "come back to Me. I am merciful; I will not be angry with you forever. Only admit that you are guilty and that you have rebelled against the Lord, your God. Confess that under every green tree you have given your love to foreign gods and that you have not obeyed My commands. I, the Lord, have spoken." He tells His chosen people, "if you want to turn, then turn back to Me. If you are faithful to Me and remove the idols I hate, it will be right for you to swear by My name. Then all the nations will ask Me to bless them, and they will praise Me."[31] Notice the conditions precedent: confess that you betrayed Me, destroy those idols, forswear other gods. Notice the object of the exercise: "Then all the nations will ask Me to bless them, and they will praise Me."

And it is when, and only when the prophet and the people concede that all the guilt lies with them, that they are the ones who turned their backs on God, that they did so even though God had been so kind to them, even though He is so compassionate and forgiving that the Lord God entertains their pleas. Thus, having assured God, "Lord God, you are

[30] *Hosea*, 13.14-16.

[31] *Jeremiah*, 3.12-13; 4.1-2.

great, and we honour you. You are faithful to your covenant and show constant love to those who love you and do what you command," Daniel appeals to God

> *We* have sinned, *we* have been evil, *we* have done wrong. *We* have rejected what You commanded us to do and have turned away from what You showed us was right. *We* have not listened to Your servants the prophets, who spoke in Your name to our kings, our rulers, our ancestors, and our whole nation. *You*, Lord, always do what is right, but *we* have always brought disgrace on ourselves.... *Our* kings, *our* rulers, and *our* ancestors have acted shamefully and acted against You. *You* are merciful and forgiving, although *we* have rebelled against You.... *We* sinned against You, and so You brought on us the curses that are written in the Law of Moses, Your servant. You did what You said You would to us and our rulers.... You, O Lord our God, were prepared to punish us, and You did, because You always do what is right, and *we* did not listen to You.... We are praying to you because You are merciful, not because we have done right. Lord, listen to us, and act. In order that every one will know that You are God, do not delay. This city and these people are Yours.[32]

Those closing words, "*In order that every one will know that You are God,* do not delay," suggest the one argument that works, an argument that Moses uses to good effect.

As usual, God is in rage. "How much longer will these people reject Me?," He roars at Moses. "How much longer will they refuse to trust in Me, even though I have performed so many miracles among them?" "I will send an epidemic and destroy them," He declares, "but I will make you the father of a nation that is larger and more powerful than they are."

Moses lavishes praise on Him for all the good things He has done to lift His chosen people. He reminds Him that many nations have heard Him declare that these people are His chosen ones. "Now if you kill all Your people," Moses argues, "*the nations who have heard Your fame will say that*

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[32] *Daniel*, 9.4-19.

You killed your people in the wilderness because You were not able to bring them into the land You promised to give them. So now Lord, I pray, *show us your power* and do what You promised when You said, 'I, the Lord, am not easily angered, and I show great love and faithfulness and forgive sin and rebellion. Yet I will not fail to punish children and grandchildren to the third and fourth generation for the sins of their parents.' And now, Lord, *according to the greatness of Your unchanging love,* forgive, I pray, the sin of these people, just as you have forgiven them ever since they left Egypt."

Sure enough, God relents – He commutes the sentence, so to say:

> I will forgive them, as you have asked. But I promise as surely as I live and as surely as My presence fills the earth, none of these people will live to enter that land. They have seen the dazzling light of My presence and the miracles I have performed in Egypt and in the wilderness, but they have tried My patience over and over again and have refused to obey Me. They will never enter the land which I promised to their ancestors....[33]

In *Deuteronomy* again, Moses recounts the grounds by urging which he was able to have God relent. For forty days and nights I lay with my face downwards in the Lord's presence for I knew that He was determined to destroy you, he tells the people who have once again taken to worshipping idols. You are the One who brought them out of Egypt, I told Him. Remember the prophets among them who were so faithful to You, I told Him, and do not pay attention to the stubbornness, wickedness, and sin of this people. "Otherwise, *the Egyptians will say* that You were unable to take Your people into the land that You had promised them. *They will say* that You took Your people out into the desert to

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[33] *Numbers,* 14.11-12, 15-23.

kill them, because You hated them. After all, these are Your people *whom You chose to be Your own* and whom You brought out of Egypt by Your great power and might."[34]

In a word, flattery plus one unfailing reason – that if You carry out the punishment, those who have heard of Your promise will think less of You.

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[34] *Deuteronomy*, 9.25-29.

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An extreme condition

It isn't just that the Lord God of the Bible is enraged if you worship someone else. He flies into paroxysms if you so much as praise anyone else. In His calculus, by praising another you insult Him. An extreme condition, one that we can scarcely believe would be the case, yet one that is the literal truth.

The Lord God has ordered Gideon to attack the enemy. They are well-entrenched, in enormous numbers "like a swarm of locusts," they have "as many camels as there are grains of sand on the seashore." Gideon and his men hesitate to hurl themselves at this mammoth opponent. But the Lord God has a different consideration in mind. "The men you have are too many for Me to give them victory over the Midianites," He tells Gideon. How come? "They might think that they had won by themselves," God says, *"and so give Me no credit."* Therefore, the Lord God commands: tell them that those who want to return home can do so, that way fewer will be left. Gideon proffers the option. Twenty-two thousand leave. Ten thousand are left. Still too many, says the Lord. He prescribes another test: take them to drink water; those who get down on their knees to drink it, the Lord says, should be sent back, and only the three hundred who scooped it up in their hands and lapped it should remain.

The number is now so small that the victory, should it follow, cannot but be attributed to God. God in turn ensures it by making the enemy troops attack each other.[1]

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[1]*Judges*, 7.

The Lord God curses the people. Later He intervenes to save them from being totally annihilated. His motive? It is the same one, this time in reverse: He saves His chosen ones lest the enemies are able to boast that *they* have destroyed the former! "With their idols they have made Me angry," God declares, "jealous with their so-called gods, gods that are really not gods...." Therefore, He hurls His curses upon them:

> So I will use a so-called nation to make them angry;
> I will make them jealous with a nation of fools.
> My anger will flame up like fire
> and burn everything on earth.
> It will reach the world below
> and consume the roots of the mountains.
> I will bring on them endless disasters
> and use all My arrows against them.
> They will die from hunger and fever;
> they will die from terrible diseases.
> I will send wild animals to attack them,
> and poisonous snakes to bite them.
> War will bring death in the streets;
> terrors will strike in the homes
> Young men and young women will die;
> neither babies nor old men will be spared.

"I would have destroyed them completely," God says. *"But I could not let their enemies boast that they had defeated My people, when it was I Myself who had crushed them...."*[2]

In rescuing them at the penultimate moment too, God's purpose is the same: to drill into the people that He is the powerful One, and not those other gods:

> The Lord will rescue His people
> when He sees that their strength is gone.
> He will have mercy on those who serve Him,
> When He sees how helpless they are.
> Then the Lord will ask His people,
> 'Where are those mighty gods you trusted?

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[2]*Deuteronomy*, 32.21-27.

You fed them with the fat of your sacrifices
and offered them wine to drink.
Let them come and help you now;
let them run to your rescue.
I, and I alone, am God;
No other god is real.
I kill and I give life, I wound and I heal,
and no one can oppose what I do....[3]

God has chosen Eli and his successors to be priests at the Tent of His presence. Eli is by now very old. His sons keep sinning: "....they were even sleeping with the women who worked at the entrance to the Tent of the Lord's presence," Eli keeps being told. He warns his sons, he pleads with them. "Stop it, my sons," he tells them. "This is an awful thing the people of the Lord are talking about. If a man sins against another man, God can defend him; but who can defend a man who sins against the Lord?"

To no avail. How come? "But they would not listen to their father," the Bible tells us, *"for the Lord had decided to kill them."* Notice: *God is the one who has decided to kill them,* but the suffering will fall on the poor and aged Eli, and of course his sons.

And why is the Lord God so upset? I made you and your sons priests, He tells Eli. I even gave you the right to keep a part of the sacrifices that are made in My honour, He reminds Eli. "Why then do you look with greed at the sacrifices and offerings which I require from My people?," He demands. "Why, Eli, do you honour your sons more than Me by letting them fatten themselves on the best parts of all the sacrifices My people offer to Me?" The creator of the entire universe, of an infinite number of galaxies, of infinite space, of infinite time, so bothered over the best parts of an animal which has been killed in some tent at some speck on this speck of an earth!

I had promised in the past that you and your family will be

[3] *Deuteronomy,* 32.36-39.

My priests forever. "But now I say, I won't have it any longer. Instead, I will honour those who honour Me, and I will treat with contempt those who despise Me." "Listen", He declares to this helpless, aged, faithful man, "the time is coming when I will kill all the young men in your family and your clan, so that no man in your family will live to be old. You will be troubled and look with envy on all the blessings I will give to the other people of Israel, but no one in your family will ever again live to old age...." Your two sons will die on the same day, He announces. But to what purpose? *"This will show you that everything I have said will come true,"* says the Lord God.[4]

The sin of Eli is that, in God's reckoning, he "honours" his sons more than God. The evidence for this is that he allows them to take the best parts of the sacrifices that arc made for God. God decides to kill them, and, therefore, the sons persist in sin. God exterminates not just the two of them, He exterminates every man of Eli's family in his youth. Why? So as to establish that everything He says comes true! The offence, the evidence, the responsibility for the sons persisting in sin, the punishment meted out not just to those two but to every man – born and unborn – in the family, the purpose of all this cruelty....

At last after twenty years unremitting labour, the Temple is complete. King Solomon and the people offer sacrifices to the Lord God. Solomon sacrifices 22,000 head of cattle and 120,000 sheep as "fellowship-offerings". The Lord hears Solomon's prayer, He appears to Solomon. He says, "I consecrate this Temple which you have built as the place where I shall be worshipped forever. I will watch over it and protect it for all time" – in fact, it won't be long before He once again takes offence, and the Temple comes to grief. But, for the moment, notice the condition He lays down:

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[4] *1 Samuel*, 2.22-34.

> *If you will serve Me in honesty and integrity,* as your father David did, and *if you obey My laws and do everything I have commanded you,* I will keep the promise I made to your father David when I told him that Israel will always be ruled by his descendants. *But if you or your descendants stop following Me, if you disobey the laws and commands I have given you, and worship other gods,* then I will remove My people Israel from the land that I have given them. I will also abandon this Temple.... People everywhere will ridicule Israel and treat her with contempt. This Temple will become a pile of ruins, and every one who passes by will be shocked and amazed....

Why has the Lord done this?, every one will ask. People, He forecasts, will answer,

> It is *because they abandoned the Lord their God,* who brought their ancestors out of Egypt. *They gave their allegiance to other gods and worshipped them.* That is why the Lord has brought this disaster on them.[5]

Even though God has Himself appeared to Solomon not once but twice, even though on each visitation He has Himself told Solomon never to worship anyone but Him, the inevitable occurs:

> Solomon loved many foreign women. Besides the daughter of the king of Egypt, he married Hittite women and women from Moab, Ammon, Edom, and Sidon. He married them even though the Lord had commanded the Israelites not to intermarry with these people, because they would cause the Israelites to give their loyalty to other gods. Solomon married seven hundred princesses and also had three hundred concubines. They made him turn away from God, and by the time he was old they had led him into the worship of foreign gods. He was not faithful to the Lord his God....[6]

God flies into His accustomed rage, and hurls His customary curses. He chooses a young official, Jeroboam, who is among

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[5] *1 Kings,* 9.1-9.

[6] *1 Kings,* 11.1-11.

those who are incensed at Solomon, and decides to hand him ten-twelfth of Solomon's kingdom. "I am going to do this because Solomon has rejected Me and has worshipped foreign gods," He announces.[7]

Solomon tries to kill Jeroboam. Jeroboam escapes to Egypt. Solomon dies. His son, Rehoboam, succeeds him. Jeroboam returns. People rebel, Rehoboam is left with Judah alone, Jeroboam becomes king of Israel.

But the usual sequence ensues. To tempt people from going to Jerusalem, Jeroboam makes two bull-calves of gold, and leads the people into venerating the idols. He builds an altar for making sacrifices to the bull-calves. God is enraged. He sends a prophet to announce His command:

> O altar, altar this is what the Lord says: 'A child, whose name will be Josiah, will be born in the family of David. He will slaughter on you the priests serving at the pagan altars who offer sacrifices on you, and he will burn human bones on you.'....[8]

On the way back, the poor prophet, contrary to the Lord's command, stops to have a meal with another prophet, and so he too is cursed: for having disobeyed the Lord and eaten here, the older prophet tells him, you shall be killed and your body will not be buried in your family grave....[9]

The curses now commence wreaking havoc on Jeroboam and his family. His young son is stricken with a grave illness. Jeroboam sends his wife to seek counsel from an old, blind prophet. The prophet conveys the Lord's familiar litany – the Lord recounts all that He has done for Jeroboam, how Jeroboam has been unfaithful to Him, and hence the familiar decision:

> ....You have committed far greater sins than those who ruled before you. You have rejected Me and have aroused My anger by making idols and metal images to worship. Because of this I will bring disaster on your dynasty and will kill all your male descendants, young and old

[7] *1 Kings*, 11.33. [8] *1 Kings*, 13.2-3. [9] *1 Kings*, 13.21-22.

> alike. I will get rid of your family; they will be swept away like dung. Any members of your family who die in the city will be eaten by dogs, and any who die in the open country will be eaten by vultures. I, the Lord, have spoken.[10]

The wife has but to enter the city, and the curses descend. The son dies.... And, of course, the wrath of God falls not just on Jeroboam and his family but on the people in general – for they had allowed themselves to be misled into worshipping foreign gods and idols....

In Judah, which is under the rule of Solomon's son, Rehoboam, the chosen people do worse! They too build "places of worship for false gods, and put up stone pillars and symbols of Asherah to worship on the hills and under shady trees...." Worse, "there were men and women who served as prostitutes at those pagan places of worship."[11] Ire, anger, rage follow....

Rehoboam is succeeded by his son, Abijah. Alas!, "He committed the same sins as his father and was not completely loyal to the Lord his God....," the Bible tells us.[12] He is succeeded by Asa. He fares a bit better, doing "what pleased the Lord." And what is this? "He removed his grandmother Maacah from her position as queen mother, because she had made an obscene idol of the fertility goddess Asherah. Asa cut down the idol and burnt it...." Unfortunately, Asa too falls short of what is wanted: "he did not destroy all the pagan places of worship...."[13]

Jeroboam's son, Nadab, becomes king of Israel. Alas!, "like his father before him," the Bible tells us, "he sinned against the Lord, and led Israel into sin...."[14]

And so Baasha plots against Nadab, overthrows him, becomes king. And now a typical thing happens – which we shall encounter in greater detail soon.

Baasha becomes king. "At once he began killing all the

[10] *1 Kings*, 14.8-11.
[11] *1 Kings*, 14.21-29.
[12] *1 Kings*, 15.3.
[13] *1 Kings*, 15.13-14.
[14] *1 Kings*, 15.26.

members of Jeroboam's family," the Bible records. *"In accordance with what the Lord had said* through His servant, the prophet Ahijah from Shiloh, all Jeroboam's family were killed; not one survived. This happened because Jeroboam aroused the anger of the Lord, the God of Israel, by the sins he committed and that he caused Israel to commit."[15] But Baasha also sins against the Lord, he too compels the Lord to rage. And so God curses him also. "You were a nobody," God, always particular about all He has done for others, reminds him, "But I made you the leader of My people.... And now you have sinned.... and led My people to sin. Their sins have aroused My anger, and so I will do away with you and your family.... Any members of your family who die in the city will be eaten by dogs, and any who die in the open country will be eaten by vultures."[16]

The Bible explains that these punishments were decreed on Baasha "because of the sins Baasha committed against the Lord. He aroused the Lord's anger not only because of the evil he did, just as King Jeroboam had done before him, *but also because he killed all Jeroboam's family."* [17]

Consider what is happening. The Lord God decrees that because of the sins Jerobaom has committed against Him, all of Jeroboam's family be killed. So, Baasha kills all of Jeroboam's family. And God decrees that all of Baasha's family will be killed because he – Baasha – has killed all of Jeroboam's family. But whatever Baasha did in this regard was in strict obedience to the decree of God Himself!

"Do not pray for these people," the Lord tells Jeremiah. "Do not cry or pray on their behalf; do not plead with Me, for I will not listen." As usual, God is in a rage. Don't you see what they are doing?, He demands of His chosen prophet. "The children gather firewood, the men build fires, and the women mix dough to bake cakes for the goddess they call the Queen of Heaven. They also pour out wine-offerings to

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[15] *1 Kings*, 15.27-30. [16] *1 Kings*, 16.1-4. [17] *1 Kings*, 16.7.

other gods, *in order to hurt Me.* But am I really the One they are hurting? No, they are hurting themselves and bringing shame on themselves. And so I, the Sovereign Lord, will pour out my fierce anger on this Temple. I will pour it out on the people and animals alike, and even on the trees and crops. My anger will be like a fire that no one can put out."[18]

That motive which is read into innocent practices of the people He has Himself decided are worthy to be His chosen people – that they honour other gods *so as to hurt Him*! That anger which in any other entity would be seen to be so extreme as to be irrational, indeed pathological.

Ezekiel is now the chosen prophet. Enraged, God has abandoned His chosen people to suffer. Ezekiel is conversing with leaders from Judah. He has a fiery vision. It is God. God has Ezekiel see what He says are the disgusting things that are being done in the precincts of the Temple itself.

At the north entrance is an idol "that was an outrage to God." Inside, on the walls are "drawings of snakes and other unclean animals, and of other things" which the chosen people are worshipping. Next, Ezekiel is shown seventy leaders each of whom is worshipping images. And then women who are weeping over the death of the god Tammuz – a god who was thought to die with the vegetation each year and come back to life the following year. He is also shown people worshipping the rising sun....

The all-encompassing, compassionate, large-hearted, magnanimous, God is convinced that the people are doing these things with one purpose alone: to spite and enrage Him! He roars at Ezekiel,

> These people are not satisfied with merely doing all the disgusting things you have seen here and with spreading violence throughout the country. No, they must come and do them here in the Temple

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[18] *Jeremiah,* 7.16-20.

itself and make Me even more angry. *Look how they insult Me in the most offensive way possible.*

That being the case, the outcome is as familiar as it is certain: "They will feel all the force of My anger," God declares. "I will not spare them or show them any mercy. They will shout prayers at Me as loud as they can, but I will not listen to them."[19]

A little later, God recalls the many times He has in fact desisted from inflicting the punishment that these chosen people actually deserved. Notice the reasons that God Himself gives for not inflicting punishment.

As usual, God recounts the favours He has done for the people – how He brought them out of Egypt, how He had chosen for them the finest land, etc. "I told them to throw away the disgusting idols they loved," God says, "and not to make themselves unclean with the false gods of Egypt, because I am the Lord their God. But they defied Me, and refused to listen. They did not throw away their disgusting idols or give up the Egyptian gods."

"I was ready to let them feel the full force of My anger there in Egypt," He tells Ezekiel. "But I did not, *since that would have brought dishonour to My name,* for in the presence of the people among whom they were living I had announced to Israel that I was going to lead them out of Egypt."[20] I brought them out into the desert, God says, "But even in the desert they defied Me...." "I was ready to make them feel the force of My anger there in the desert, and destroy them," He says. "But I did not, *since that would have brought dishonour to My name among the nations which had seen Me lead Israel out of Egypt.*"[21]

He let that generation be, God says, and instead warned the next generation to respect Him and His decrees. But they too defied Him. Again God was ready to kill them all, again

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[19] *Ezekiel*, 8.1-17. [20] *Ezekiel*, 20. 7-9. [21] *Ezekiel*, 20.10-14.

He held His hand, and for the same reason: "But I did not, *since that would have brought dishonour to My name among the nations which had seen Me lead Israel out of Egypt.* So I made them another promise in the desert...."[22]

Next, God says He *deliberately misleads the very people He has chosen as His own, He deliberately lets them wallow in things that disgust Him* – so that He can punish them all the more. He misleads them so that He may punish them. He punishes them so that the pain will remind them that He is the Lord their God:

> Then I gave them laws that are *not* good and commands that do *not* bring life. I let them defile themselves with their own offerings, and let them sacrifice their first-born sons. *This was to punish them and show them that I am the Lord.*[23]

What would you call a father, an ordinary, mortal father who behaved like that towards his children? Does the same behaviour become exalted because it is the doing of the Lord God?

God again commands Ezekiel to remind people of these ways by which their fathers "insulted Me by their unfaithfulness."[24] And to convey His determination to punish them, and bring them to heel. "Then you will know that I am the Lord," He says.[25] He both warns the people, and holds out a promise – the object of each of these contrary decrees being to ensure that His own name is honoured. Please yourselves, He tells the people. Go on serve your idols, He taunts them. "But I warn you that after this you will have to obey Me and *stop dishonouring My holy name by offering gifts to your idols.*"[26] Soon I will begin accepting the sacrifices you burn *"and the nations will see that I am holy."*[27] And I will bring you back to the land I have promised

[22] *Ezekiel*, 20.18-23.
[23] *Ezekiel*, 20.25-26.
[24] *Ezekiel*, 20.27.
[25] *Ezekiel*, 20.37-38.
[26] *Ezekiel*, 20.39.
[27] *Ezekiel*, 20.41.

you, *"then you will know that I am the Lord."*[28] "Then you will remember the disgusting things you did and how you defiled yourselves. You will be disgusted with yourselves because of all the evil things you did. *When I act to protect My honour, you Israelites will know that I am the Lord,* because I do not deal with you as your wicked, evil actions deserve."[29]

After round upon round of privation, death, epidemics, wars, the people will be brought back. The Lord God shows Ezekiel His throne at the Temple. He tells Ezekiel how things in the future will differ from the past: "....Neither the people of Israel nor their kings will ever again *disgrace My name by worshipping other gods* or by burying the corpses of their kings in this place....," He declares.[30]

Ezekiel is gone. Zephaniah is the chosen prophet. God speaks to him. "I am going to destroy everything on earth, all human beings and animals, birds and fish," He thunders. "I will bring about the downfall of the wicked," He says leaving some little hope for those who are not wicked. Only to smother it in the very next sentence: "I will destroy all mankind, and no survivors will be left. I, the Lord, have spoken."[31]

As usual, He is particularly determined to pulverize His chosen people. But why this time? God explains:

> I will punish the people of Jerusalem and of all Judah. I will destroy the last trace of the worship of Baal there, and no one will ever remember the pagan priests who serve him. I will destroy anyone who goes up on the roof and worships the sun, the moon, and the stars. I will also destroy those who worship Me and swear loyalty to Me, but then take oaths in the name of the god Molech. I will destroy those who have turned back and no longer follow Me, those who do not come to Me or ask Me to guide them.[32]

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[28] *Ezekiel*, 20.42. [29] *Ezekiel*, 20.44. [30] *Ezekiel*, 43.5-7.
[31] *Zephaniah*, 1.2-3. [32] *Zephaniah*, 1.4-6.

Notice the reasons for the almighty anger, notice what God hopes to achieve by the suffering He shall soon inflict. Zephaniah warns the people, "....*The Lord is preparing to sacrifice His people and has invited enemies to plunder Judah....*"[33] Notice who it is that is inviting the enemies to plunder His chosen people, notice who it is that is inviting them to come and ruin Jerusalem and Judah: it is the Lord God Himself.

The kings and armies of Moab, of Ammon, of Sudan, of Assyria successively come and do so. Now God is furious at *them* – for humbling His chosen people! "I have heard the people of Moab and Ammon insulting and taunting My people, and boasting that they would seize their land," He thunders. "As surely as I am the living Lord, the God of Israel, I swear that Moab and Ammon are going to be destroyed like Sodom and Gomorrah.... that is how the people of Moab and Ammon will be punished for their pride and arrogance and for insulting the people of the Lord Almighty...."[34]

And then, "The Lord will also put the people of Sudan to death...."[35]

And then, "The Lord will use His power to destroy Assyria. He will make the city of Nineveh a deserted ruin, a waterless desert...."[36]

Destroyed, pulverized, accursed.... For what? For carrying out the command of the Lord Himself to inflict punishment on His people!

All successively destroyed, pulverized, accursed.... Alas! to no avail. For soon God is complaining again,

> I have wiped out whole nations; I have destroyed their cities and left their walls and towers in ruins. The cities are deserted; the streets are empty – no one is left. I thought that then My people would have reverence for Me and accept My discipline, that they would never

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[33] *Zephaniah*, 1.7.
[34] *Zephaniah*, 2.8-9.
[35] *Zephaniah*, 2.12.
[36] *Zephaniah*, 2.13-15.

> forget the lesson I taught them. *But soon they were behaving as badly as ever.*[37]

And that becomes the ground for inflicting another round of merciless suffering – this time on *all* mankind:

> Just wait, wait for the day when I rise to accuse the nations. I have made up my mind to gather nations and kingdoms, in order to let them feel the force of My anger. The whole earth will be destroyed by the fire of My fury.
> Then I will change the people of the nation....

In what way?

> And they will pray to Me alone and not to other gods. Even from distant Sudan My scattered people will bring offerings to Me....[38]

What a thing for which to wreck all mankind! What an objective at which to aim!

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[37] *Zephaniah*, 3.6-7. [38] *Zephaniah*, 3.8-10.

18

What the faithful must do to the altars and idols of other religions

Three-quarters of the Bible revolves round a singular sequence:

- The Lord God chooses a people as His own;
- He commands them to worship no one but Him, and destroy the idols and temples of other people;
- They promise to do so, but in fact repeatedly revert to idols and altars of their original gods;
- The Lord God brings down unspeakable suffering on them;
- Tortured, they once again promise to abide by His command;
- He relents, and turns to punishing those who had carried out the punishment He had decreed;
- These new nations whom He had set upon His people, and the chosen people themselves revert to their original Gods, idols and altars;
- And the cycle begins again....

To describe the condition of the Almighty Lord God when He sees idols as "fear" would be so gross an understatement that it would amount to untruth. Even "panic" would not describe the dread. The only word that comes close to depicting His condition is "paranoia".

And throughout the Bible, the Lord God strives to pass this paranoia on to His chosen people. "I, the Lord, am a God who is full of compassion and pity, who is not easily angered and who shows great love and faithfulness." He says in a description that runs contrary to what He does throughout the

Bible, "I keep My promise for thousands of generations and forgive evil and sin;" only to add, "but I will not hesitate to punish children and grand-children to the third and fourth generation for the sins of their parents."[1]

And what must they do to escape that fate? "Do not worship any other god," the Lord God says, "because I, the Lord, tolerate no rivals." That is of course familiar. Now see what He counsels about how the faithful are to deal with persons of other faiths:

> Do not make any treaties with the people of the country, because when they worship their pagan gods and sacrifice to them, they will invite you to join them, and you will be tempted to eat the food they offer to their gods. Your sons might marry those foreign women, who would lead them to be unfaithful to Me and to worship their pagan gods....[2]

So, what should they do? "Instead, tear down their altars," the Lord God commands. "Destroy their sacred pillars, and cut down the symbols of their goddess Asherah.... Do not make and worship gods of metal...."[3]

Scores and scores and scores of passages speak to the same paranoia. Garnering them, and reflecting on the condition they reveal, I leave to the reader – as an inducement for him to wade through the Bible – the Book having which is said to be one of the grounds for their superiority.

Idols and altars being such a threat, what does the Almighty, the Lord God command be done about them?

"In the land that you are taking," the Bible commands, "*destroy all the places where the people worship their gods* on high mountains, on hills, and under green trees. *Tear down their altars and smash their sacred stone pillars to pieces. Burn their symbols of the goddess Asherah and chop down*

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[1] *Exodus*, 34.5-7. [2] *Exodus*, 34.14-16. [3] *Exodus*, 34.13,17.

their idols, so that they will never again be worshipped at those places."[4]

All sorts may try to inveigle you into worshipping those false gods, the Bible, the book which is presented to us as the epitome of tolerance, warns. Be alert to them, and deal with them in one way alone:

> Even your brother or your son or your daughter or the wife you love or your closest friend may secretly encourage you to worship other gods, gods that you and your ancestors have never worshipped. One of you may encourage you to worship the gods of the people who live near you or the gods of those who live far away. But do not let him persuade you; do not even listen to him. *Show him no mercy or pity, and do not protect him. Kill him! Be the first to stone him, and then let every one else stone him too. Stone him to death !* He tried to lead you away from the Lord your God....[5]

Nor is it sufficient to kill an individual:

> When you are living in the towns that the Lord your God gives you, you may hear that some worthless men of your nation have misled the people of their town to worship gods that you have never worshipped before. If you hear such a rumour, investigate it thoroughly; and if it is true that this evil thing did happen, *then kill all the people in that town, and all their livestock too. Destroy that town completely. Bring together all the possessions of the people who live there and pile them up in the town square. Then burn the town and everything in it as an offering to the Lord your God. It must be left in ruins for ever and never again be rebuilt....*[6]

In dealing with people of other faiths, God seeks to mould His believers in His own image: He gives you a chance to destroy all your native beliefs and accept Him as the one and only God; if you take the chance, good; if you don't He lets all hell loose on you. His command to the faithful is to do likewise:

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[4] *Deuteronomy,* 12.2-3.

[5] *Deuteronomy,* 13.6-11.

[6] *Deuteronomy,* 13.12-16.

> When you go to attack a city, first give its people a chance to surrender. If they open their gates and surrender, they are all to become your slaves and do forced labour for you. But if the people of that city will not surrender, but choose to fight, surround it with your army. Then, when the Lord your God lets you capture the city, *kill every man in it. You may, however, take for yourselves the women, the children, the livestock and everything else in the city. You may use everything that belongs to your enemies. The Lord has given it to you.* That is how you are to deal with those cities that are far away from the land you will settle in.[7]

Harsh? But that directive, it turns out, is one of the more compassionate of His directives:

> But when you capture cities in the land that the Lord your God is giving you, *kill every one. Completely destroy all the people*: the Hittites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, as the Lord ordered you to do. *Kill them,* so that they will not make you sin against the Lord by teaching you to do all the disgusting things that they do in the worship of their gods.[8]

As for the women, the compassionate Lord decrees a small mercy:

> When the Lord your God gives you victory in battle and you take prisoners, you may see among them a beautiful woman you like and want to marry. Take her to your home, where she will shave her head, cut her fingernails, and change her clothes. She is to stay in your home and mourn for her parents for a month; after that, you may marry her. Later, if you no longer want her, you are to let her go free. Since you forced her to have intercourse with you, you cannot treat her as a slave and sell her.[9]

These are not academic discourses given by the Lord God merely for the theoretical education of His devotees. By His grace victory falls to His worshippers, and they visit His command on their victims.

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[7] *Deuteronomy*, 20.10-15. [8] *Deuteronomy*, 20.16-18.
[9] *Deuteronomy*, 21.10-14.

Joshua is the prophet. God sets out an elaborate plan: priests are to circle the city for six days, trumpets are to be blown, the climax is to be a piercing shout. As decreed by Him, at the shout, the walls collapse. "With their swords they killed *every one* in the city, men and women, young and old," the Bible tells us in triumph. "They also killed the cattle, sheep and donkeys.... Then they set fire and burnt it to the ground, along with everything in it, except the things made of gold, silver, bronze and iron which they took and put in the Lord's treasury" – as literal a presaging as is possible for the Ghaznavis and Ghauris! The plan implemented, Joshua issues "a solemn warning":

> Anyone who tries to rebuild the city of Jericho will be under the Lord's curse.
> Whoever lays the foundation will lose his eldest son;
> Whoever builds the gates will lose his youngest.[10]

The Lord God now orders him to advance on Ai. The place and its king are captured. What does the prophet lead his soldiers to do? The Bible describes it for us:

> The Israelites killed *every one* of the enemy in the barren country where they had chased them. Then they went back to Ai and killed *every one* there. Joshua kept his spear pointed at Ai and did not put it down *until every person there had been killed. The whole population of Ai was killed that day* – twelve thousand men and women.... Joshua burnt Ai and left it in ruins.... He hanged the king of Ai from a tree and left his body there until evening. At sunset Joshua gave orders for the body to be removed, and it was thrown down at the entrance to the city gate....[11]

Next, this prophet, chosen of God, seized the Amorites. The soldiers led by the prophet "slaughtered" their opponents. The Lord God joined in, sending upon the latter "large hailstones", and thereby Himself killed more than had been

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[10] *Joshua*, 6.21, 24, 26.

[11] *Joshua*, 8.24-29.

killed by the soldiers. Joshua then had the five kings of the Amorites brought out, and slaughtered them himself.[12]

The Lord then granted Joshua and his men victory over Makkedah, and Joshua "put *every one* in the city to death; *no one was left alive.* He did to the king of Makkedah what he had done to the king of Jericho."[13]

And then the good Lord granted them victory over Libnah. And in turn His chosen ones "*spared no one, but killed every person in it.* They did to the king what they had done to the king of Jericho."[14]

And then the good Lord gave them victory over Lachish. "Just as they had done at Libnah, *they spared no one, but killed every person in the city....*"[15]

And then with His blessing they surrounded Eglon. And, what with the good Lord backing them, "They captured it the same day and put *every one* there to death, just as they had done at Lachish."[16]

And then Joshua led his men up the hills to Hebron. They attacked it and captured it. And "*They killed the king and every one else in the city* as well as in the nearby towns. Joshua condemned the city to *total destruction*, just as he had done to Eglon. *No one in it was left alive.*"[17]

And on and on. "....Joshua captured the whole land.... He spared no one; every one was put to death. *This is what the Lord God of Israel had commanded....*"[18]

And then to Hazor. And there too Joshua killed the king, and "*they put every one there to death; no one was left alive, and the city was burnt.*"[19]

How is all this to be reconciled with the image – of tolerance, compassion, broad-mindedness – that Christian missionaries would have us swallow? It *is* a real dilemma. If they say, the accounts are not true, even if they maintain, like

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[12]*Joshua*, 10.7-27.
[13]*Joshua*, 10.28.
[14]*Joshua*, 10.29-30.
[15]*Joshua*, 10.31-33.
[16]*Joshua*, 10.34-35.
[17]*Joshua*, 10.36-38.
[18]*Joshua*, 10.40.
[19]*Joshua*, 11.10-11.

the Islamic apologists do today, that the accounts are poetic exaggerations, they have to forego the claim that every word of the Bible is true because it is the Word of God. On the other hand, if they own up to these accounts, they have to forego their claim to tolerance, compassion and the rest.

As for responsibility, it isn't just that Joshua was a prophet of God. The Bible tells us emphatically that he was doing no more than carrying out the commands of the Lord God:

> *Joshua captured all these cities and their kings, putting every one to death, just as Moses, the Lord's servant, had commanded.... The Lord had given His commands to His servant Moses, Moses had given them to Joshua, and Joshua obeyed them. He did everything that the Lord had commanded Moses.*[20]

Not just that. The Lord God had a double-responsibility in the outcome. It isn't just that what was done was merely the carrying out of His commands. *He had so arranged things that the potential victims would be stubborn, that they would put themselves up to fight the chosen of God, and thereby invite their own total destruction*. With one exception, all the peoples refused to accept the peace-terms that God's chosen offered – in accordance with God's command these had to be that they surrender absolutely, that they discard their gods and accept the Lord God as their only god. Nor was their refusal fortuitous, says the Bible,

> *The Lord God had made them determined to fight the Israelites, so that they would be condemned to total destruction and all be killed without mercy. This was what the Lord had commanded Moses.*[21]

God puts up the Midianites to punish His chosen people for what He decides has been the latter's unfaithfulness. They do so. He now puts up Gideon to punish the Midianites for having acted according to His command. Gideon is apprehensive. How can I do so? My clan is the weakest tribe

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[20] *Joshua*, 11.12, 14-15.
[21] *Joshua*, 11.20.

in Manasseh, and I am the least member of my family. Don't worry, God tells Gideon, I will be backing you. Thereupon, God starts giving detailed instructions to Gideon about what he is to do. Among these is the command about what Gideon is to do regarding the altar at which are venerated those twin torments of God, the deities Baal and Asherah:

> Take your father's bull and another bull seven years old, tear down your father's altar to Baal, and cut down the symbol of the goddess Asherah, which is beside it. Build a well-constructed altar to the Lord your God on top of this mound. Then take the second bull and burn it whole as an offering, using for firewood the symbol of Asherah you have cut down.' So Gideon took ten of his servants and did what the Lord had told him. He was too afraid of his family and the people of the town to do it by day, so he did it by night....[22]

That remains the pattern throughout. King Ahaziah has been murdered. His mother orders that all members of the royal family be killed. Only one child, Joash, is rescued by an aunt. She hides him in the Temple for six years. Eventually she has him crowned king by the priest. The people come and pay him allegiance. The mother of Ahaziah rushes to the Temple. The aunt has the mother dragged out of the Temple, and killed at the Gate. "Then", says the Bible, "the people went to the Temple of Baal and tore it down; they smashed the altars and the idols, and killed Mattan, the priest of Baal, in front of the altars...."[23]

How come the All-powerful is so powerless?

But in spite of all the killings, the destruction of altars and idols, the same sequence continues. Kings follow kings, most of them revert to Baal and Asherah. Those who do not, it turns out, become guilty of another sin: they destroy pagan places of worship all right, *but they do not destroy all of them, they*

[22]*Judges*, 6.14-16, 25-27.

[23]*2 Kings*, 11.17.

do not destroy them completely. God, therefore, is compelled to bring them to grief also!

Joash, that child who was hidden, rules Judah for forty years. "Throughout his life", the Bible says, "he did what pleased the Lord, because Jehoiada the priest instructed him. *However the pagan places of worship were not destroyed, and the people continued to offer sacrifices and burn incense there....*"[24] In the 23rd year of his reign, Jehoahaz becomes king of Israel. "Like King Jeroboam before him he sinned against the Lord and led Israel into sin; he never gave up his evil ways...."[25] He is succeeded by Jehoash. "He too sinned against the Lord and followed the evil example of King Jeroboam, who had led Israel into sin...."[26] In Judah Amaziah becomes king. "He did what was pleasing to the Lord," the Bible tells us; "but he was not like his ancestor King David; instead he did what his father Joash had done. *He did not tear down the pagan places of worship, and the people continued to offer sacrifices and burn incense there....*"[27] In the 15th year of the reign of Amaziah, another Jeroboam, the son of Jehoash, becomes king of Israel. "He sinned against the Lord," runs the familiar complaint of the Bible, "following the wicked example of his predecessor King Jeroboam, son of Nebat, who led Israel into sin...."[28] In Judah, Uzziah becomes king. He falls in the second category, for we learn from the Bible, "Following the example of his father, he did what was pleasing to the Lord. *But the pagan places of worship were not destroyed, and the people continued to offer sacrifices and burn incense there.*" Accordingly, "The Lord struck Uzziah with a dreaded skin-disease that stayed with him the rest of his life. He lived in his house, relieved of all duties, while his son Jotham governed the country...."[29] In the 39th year of his reign, Menahim becomes king of Israel and rules in Samaria for ten years. To a pattern, evidently, for we learn,

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[24] *2 Kings*, 12.2-3. [25] *2 Kings*, 13.2. [26] *2 Kings*, 13.11.
[27] *2 Kings*, 14.3-4. [28] *2 Kings*, 14.23-24. [29] *2 Kings*, 15.3-5.

"He sinned against the Lord, for until the day of his death he followed the wicked example of King Jeroboam, son of Nebat, who led Israel into sin till the day of his death...."[30] He is succeeded by Pekhiah. Alas!, "He sinned against the Lord, following the example of King Jeroboam, son of Nebat, who led Israel into sin...."[31] He is succeeded by Pekah as king of Israel, and "He sinned against the Lord, following the example of King Jeroboam, son of Nebat, who led Israel into sin...."[32] Remember Jotham – the son who ruled as his father was confined to his house because of the dreaded skin disease? Well, he eventually becomes king of Judah, and rules it for sixteen years. He is the one who built the North Gate of the Temple. But the net result? "Following the example of his father Uzziah, Jotham did what was pleasing to the Lord. *But the pagan places of worship were not destroyed, and the people continued to offer sacrifices and burn incense there....*"[33] And then Jotham's son, Ahaz becomes king of Judah. He rules for sixteen years, but turns out to be deliberately perverse: "He did not follow the good example of his ancestor King David; instead he did what was not pleasing to the Lord his God and followed the example of the kings of Israel. He even sacrificed his own son as burnt-offering to idols, imitating the disgusting practice of people whom the Lord had driven out of the land as the Israelites advanced. At the pagan places of worship, on the hills, and under every shady tree, Ahaz offered sacrifices and burnt incense...."[34] Hoshea becomes king of Israel, and rules in Samaria for nine years. He turns out to be a bit of an exception: "He sinned against the Lord, but not as much as the kings who had ruled Israel before him...."[35]

The predictable happens:

> Samaria fell because the Israelites sinned against the Lord their God.... They worshipped other gods, followed the customs of the people

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[30] *2 Kings,* 15.18. [31] *2 Kings,* 15.24. [32] *2 Kings,* 15.28.
[33] *2 Kings,* 15.34-35. [34] *2 Kings,* 16.1-4. [35] *2 Kings,* 17.2.

> whom the Lord had driven out as His people advanced.... They built pagan places of worship in all their towns, from the smallest village to the largest city. On all the hills and under every shady tree they put up stone pillars and images of the goddess Asherah, and they burnt incense on all the pagan altars, following the practice of the people whom the Lord had driven out of the land. They aroused the Lord's anger with all their wicked deeds, and disobeyed the Lord's command not to worship idols....[36]

This is the conduct of the people God has chosen as His own. In the case of the kings, this is the conduct of ones who otherwise do a lot to advance God's plan: several of them kill thousands in God's cause. Most important, how come God – the Almighty, the All-powerful – is so ineffectual? And *why* is He so ineffectual? After all, as He is All-powerful, as nothing happens except at His command, He must Himself be making His chosen kings and people behave in so contrary a fashion. If the *mens rea* be deduced from what He does as a consequence, He must be setting them up to outrage Him so that He may bring down the unspeakable cruelties that He in fact sends down on them. What would you call a father who so arranges things in regard to his children? Would you not call him a sadist? And how is this kind of a God an improvement over the trees and rivers, the sun and sea to which we Pagans bow?

The positive examples

But the Bible is not full merely of negative examples. Manasseh becomes king of Judah. He turns out to be as unfaithful as the rest of them: sinning against the Lord, rebuilding the pagan places of worship that his father destroyed, worshipping Baal and Asherah himself.... God shouts,

> ....*So I, the Lord God.... will* bring such disaster on Jerusalem and

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[36] *2 Kings*, 17.7-12.

Judah that every one who hears about it will be stunned.... *I will* wipe Jerusalem clean of its people, as clean as a plate that has been wiped and turned upside down. *I will* abandon the people who survive, and will hand them over to their enemies, who will conquer them and plunder their land. *I will* do this to My people because they have stirred up My anger....[37]

Who will? *I will,* says the Lord God, *I will,* He says repeatedly. And yet, in less than no time He pastes the responsibility first on His people – for compelling Him to punish them – and then on their enemies for meting out what He has decreed.

The wrath of the Lord God, and what He has decided as a consequence is conveyed to king Josiah. He acts swiftly to preempt God's wrath, he takes one step after another to arrange things to God's satisfaction. He desecrates altars, he "smashed the altars to bits," he breaks the stone pillars to pieces, he cuts down the symbols of the goddess, he "burnt it, pounded its ashes to dust, and scattered it over the public burial-ground," he "ground the idols to dust and broke in pieces all the altars," "he killed the pagan priests on the altars where they served, and he burnt human bones on every altar...."

Beginning in Judah and Jerusalem, Josiah repeats each of these steps in city after city – Ephraim, Simeon, as far north as Naphtali. And thus, the Bible, the book which is projected to our poor, illiterate tribals as the fount of tolerance, of civilization, of wisdom, tells us, Josiah "cleansed" the places, he "purified" them.[38]

In all this Josiah is not just some enthusiast doing things on his own which *he* thinks will please the Lord God. As we have seen, the Bible lists Josiah among the few who do *what actually pleases the Lord God.* More than that, in doing what

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[37] *2 Kings,* 21.1-5, 10-15; also 22.16-20.
[38] *2 Kings,* 23.5-20; *2 Chronicles,* 34.3-8.

he did, Josiah is following the command of the Lord God literally, to the dot. For the Lord has proclaimed,

> ....I will send a sword to destroy the places where people worship idols. The altars will be torn down and the incense-altars broken. All the people there will be killed in front of their idols. I will scatter the corpses of the people of Israel; I will scatter their bones all round the altars. All the cities of Israel will be destroyed, so that their idols and their altars will be smashed to pieces, their incense-altars will be shattered, and everything they made will disappear. People will be killed everywhere, and those who survive will acknowledge that I am the Lord....
> Wring your hands! Stamp your feet! Cry in sorrow.... They are going to die in war, by famine, and by disease. Those far away will fall ill and die; those nearby will be killed in war; those who survive will starve to death. They will feel all the force of My anger. Corpses will be scattered among the idols and round the altars, scattered on every hill, on the top of every mountain, under every green tree and every large oak, in every place where they burnt sacrifices to their idols. *Then every one will know that I am the Lord*. Yes, I will stretch out My hand and destroy their country.... *Then every one will know that I am the Lord.*[39]

Josiah does no more than obey.

[39] *Ezekiel*, 6.3-7, 11-14.

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The primitive, the superstitious becomes the divine, the sublime – when *they* do it!

Bowing to an idol of some god other than the one Lord God is heinous. Making any offering, sacrificing anything in honour of any other deity is terrible. Even burning incense before representations of those others, as we have seen, is a capital crime. But when it comes to Himself, the Lord God is both – very possessive, as well as very, very punctilious.

He commands His chosen people to break down all idols of others. He commands them to pulverize all altars of other gods.[1] And then commands,

> Every first-born son and first-born male domestic animal belongs to Me, but you are to buy back every first-born donkey by offering a lamb in its place. If you do not buy it back, break its neck. But buy back every first-born son.
> No one is to appear before Me without an offering....[2]

The Temple in Jerusalem is at last nearing completion. The Lord God is giving instructions to Ezekiel about how it is to be consecrated to Him. "Mortal man, listen to what I tell you," He says. "When the altar is built, you are to dedicate it by burning sacrifices on it and by sprinkling on it the blood of the animals that were sacrificed.... You will give them [the priests] a young bull to offer as a sacrifice for sin. You are to take some of its blood and put it on the projections on the top corners of the altar, and on the corners of the middle section of the altar, and all round its edges. In this way you will purify the altar

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[1] *Exodus,* 34.1-18. [2] *Exodus,* 34.19-20.

and consecrate it. You are to take the bull that is offered as a sacrifice for sin and burn it at the specified place outside the Temple area. The next day you are to take a male goat *without any defects* and offer it as a sacrifice for sin. Purify the altar with its blood in the same way as you did with the bull. When you have finished doing that, take a young bull and young ram, *both of them without any defects,* and bring them to Me. The priests will sprinkle salt on them and burn them as an offering to Me. Each day for seven days you are to offer a goat, a bull, and a ram as sacrifices for sin. *All of them must be without any defects....*"

The killing of innocent animals brings as much honour to Him, evidently, as to any of the deities which these missionaries have condemned as primitive. The cleansing and honouring by blood of these poor animals – is it more compassionate when it is done in honour of the Lord God than when it is done for the deity of the Incas? And notice how finicky the Lord God is about the animals that they must bring and kill in His Temple – make sure, He says repeatedly, that they are without any defects.[3]

The Lord Almighty remonstrates with the priests:

> A son honours his father, and a servant honours his master. I am your father – why don't you honour Me? I am your master – why don't you respect Me? You despise Me, and yet you ask, 'How have we despised You?' This is how – *by offering worthless food on my altar.* Then you ask, 'How have we failed to respect You?' I will tell you – by showing contempt for My altar. When you bring a blind or sick or lame animal to sacrifice to Me, do you think there is nothing wrong with that? Try giving an animal like that to the governor! Would he be pleased with you or grant you any favours?'....
>
> ....As your offering to Me you bring a stolen animal or one that is lame or sick. Do you think I will accept that from you? A curse on the cheat who sacrifices a worthless animal to Me, when he has in his flock a good animal that he promised to give Me. For I am a great King, and people of all nations fear Me.[4]

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[3] *Ezekiel*, 43.18-25. [4] *Malachi*, 1.6-8, 13-14.

In Exodus, God prescribes with great meticulousness how He is to be honoured – by offerings of gold, silver, bronze, fine linen.... sweet smelling incense, jewels. He goes into minute details about the Tent which should be made for Him, about the box in which He wants the covenant to be kept – it must be of acacia wood, it must be covered in gold inside and out, it must have a gold border, it must have four gold carrying rings. He is equally finicky about the Table, Lamp Stand, Altar, the linen curtains, the garments of the priests....[5] How come the creator of this infinite universe, of endless time and space is so concerned about baubles?

Similarly, much of Leviticus is taken up with descriptions of animals and birds which are to be sacrificed to Him, how the blood is to be offered to Him, how the smell that rises as the poor animal burns – specially of the fat as it burns – is pleasing to Him. This holy Book sets out many occasions on which, the many purposes for which, the many sins to expiate which God requires these "sacrifice offerings". It commends an easy way for sinners to escape the consequences of their sins:

> When Aaron has finished performing the ritual to purify the Most Holy Place, the rest of the Tent of the Lord's presence, and the altar, he shall present to the Lord the live goat chosen by Azazel. He shall put both his hands on the goat's head and confess over it all the evils, sins, and rebellions of the people of Israel, and so transfer them to the goat's head. The goat will carry all their sins away with him into some uninhabited land.[6]

What mockery Christian missionaries would let fly if they encountered some of our tribals acting on the identical supposition?

But even more important than making these offerings and sacrifices and rituals is to obey Him to the last letter. And what carrying out His commands literally means, we have seen. As

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[5] *Exodus,* 24 onwards. [6] *Leviticus,* 16.20-22.

usual, He directs Saul to exterminate an entire people – this time those of Amalek. Saul marches on them. All the people are butchered. God is furious. He calls Samuel and tells him that Saul has disobeyed Him. Samuel conveys this to Saul. But I have carried out the Lord God's command, Saul protests. "Why then do I hear the cattle mooing and sheep bleating?," Samuel asks. Saul explains that his men destroyed Amalekites completely, but that they did not finish off the best cattle and sheep, and instead have brought them over so that they may be sacrificed to the Lord God. He prefers obedience to sacrifice, Samuel says. And Saul has to acknowledge that he has sinned. And the kingdom is taken from him....[7]

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[7] *1 Samuel*, 15.10-30.

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"And then they will know I am the Lord"

In bringing down unspeakable suffering on mankind, in relenting and pardoning people the Lord God pursues just one aim: and He is candid about it. He kills and ruins entire peoples saying, "And then they will know I am the Lord God." He promises to restore what He had promised them, once in a while He rehabilitates them, each time saying, "And then they will know I am the Lord God"!

He has enabled His chosen people to flee Egypt. They are blocked by the sea. Why are you crying out for help?, He asks Moses. Tell your people to move forward, and you, you lift up your stick and hold it over the sea. The water will divide and the people will be able to walk through the sea on dry ground.

So far so good. One cannot grudge God doing a favour to the people He has chosen as His own – though His purpose for choosing a people at all is that they will worship Him and Him alone: *viz.*, "....Just as shorts fit tightly around the waist, so I intended all the people of Israel and Judah to hold tightly to Me. I did this so that they would be My people and *would bring praise and honour to My name....*"[1] But He proceeds further. The water will divide and His chosen people will be able to cross over, but then, He declares,

> I will make the Egyptians so stubborn that they will go in after them, and I will gain honour by My victory over the king, his army, his chariots, and his drivers.

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[1] *Jeremiah*, 13.11.

But why drown them? Why kill them in so horrible a way? The Lord God explains:

> *When I defeat them, the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord.*[2]

As usual, He is cursing the people He has chosen as His own. You will be corpses, He thunders. You will be the meat in a pot, He thunders. I will hand you over to foreigners who will kill you in your own country. To what purpose?

> *Then every one will know that I am the Lord....*[3]

Tell the people of Jerusalem, God commands His prophet, Ezekiel, "...Cities that are now full will be destroyed, and the country will be made a wilderness." To what purpose?

> *Then every one will know that I am the Lord....*[4]

He curses the poor women. He is particularly incensed with the wristbands they wear. "I hate the wristbands you wear in your attempt to control life and death," He thunders. "I will rip them off your arms and set free the people that you are controlling. I will rip off your scarves and let My people escape from your power once and for all." To what purpose?

> *Then you will know that I am the Lord....*[5]

"I will send My four worst punishments on Jerusalem," God announces yet again, "war, famine, wild animals, and disease," till the people are killed, and the place brought to ruin. "Just as the vine is taken from the forest and burnt, so I will take the people who live in Jerusalem and will punish them. They have escaped one fire, but now fire will burn them up." And what would that accomplish?

> *When I punish them, you will know that I am the Lord....*[6]

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[2]*Exodus*, 14.15-18. [3]*Ezekiel*, 11.7-12. [4]*Ezekiel*, 12.17-20.
[5]*Ezekiel*, 13.18-21. [6]*Ezekiel*, 14.12-21; 15.6-8.

He, the All-powerful, all-knowing, compassionate Lord God, *deliberately* misleads His people – so that He can punish them for what they are doing as a result of His misleading commands. "Then I gave them laws that are not good," He says, "and commands that do not bring life. I let them defile themselves with their own offerings, and I let them sacrifice their first-born sons. This was to punish them and *show them that I am the Lord*."[7] What a fine God – He allows little infants to be killed so as to establish that He, and not anyone else, is the Lord!

"I will take firm control of you and make you obey My covenant," He warns the people. "I will take away from among you those who are rebellious and sinful...." To what purpose?

> *Then you will know that I am the Lord....*[8]

Go and please yourselves, God tells the chosen people, go on serve your idols. "But I warn you that after this you will have to obey Me and stop dishonouring My holy name by offering gifts to your idols." He pledges to take them to the promised land. And what is it that He looks forward to by doing so?

> There in the land, on My holy mountain, the high mountain of Israel, all you people of Israel *will worship Me.* I will be pleased with you and will expect you to bring Me your sacrifices, your best offerings, and your holy gifts. After I bring you out of the countries where you have been scattered and gather you together, I will accept the sacrifices that you burn, *and the nations will see that I am holy.* When I bring you back to Israel...., *then you will know that I am the Lord....* When I act to protect My honour, you Israelites *will know that I am the Lord,* because I do not deal with you as your wicked, evil actions deserve.[9]

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[7] *Ezekiel*, 20.25-26. [8] *Ezekiel*, 20.37-38. [9] *Ezekiel*, 20.39-44.

A telling metaphor

Soon, the Lord God is using a surprising, but telling metaphor. "There were once two sisters," He tells His prophet. "When they were young, living in Egypt, they lost their virginity and became prostitutes. The older one was Oholah (she represents Samaria), and the younger one was named Oholibah (she represents Jerusalem)." "I married both of them," God says, "and they bore Me children." And yet a strange thing transpired: "Although she was mine, Oholah continued to be a prostitute and was full of lust for her lovers from Assyria. They were soldiers in uniforms of purple, noblemen and high ranking officers; all of them were handsome young cavalry officers. She was the whore for all the Assyrian officers, and her lust led her to defile herself by worshipping Assyrian idols. She continued what she had begun as a prostitute in Egypt, where she lost her virginity. From the time she was a girl, men slept with her and treated her like a prostitute. So I handed her over to her Assyrian lovers whom she wanted so much. They stripped her naked, seized her sons and daughters, and then killed her with a sword...."

The case of the younger sister He married turned out to be even worse, the Lord God explains. "Even though her sister Oholibah saw this, she was wilder and more of a prostitute than Oholah had ever been. She too was full of lust for the Assyrian officers – soldiers in bright uniforms – and for the cavalry officers, all those handsome young men. I saw that she was completely immoral, that the second sister was as bad as the first."

Surely, a husband whose powers to transform and set right are as extensive as those of the Lord God could think up some corrective. But what happens? God explains, with more than a touch of helplessness and regret:

> She sank deeper and deeper in her immorality. She was attracted by

> the images of high Babylonian officials carved into the wall and painted red, with sashes round their waists and fancy turbans on their heads. As soon as she saw them, she was filled with lust and sent messengers to them in Babylonia. The Babylonians came to have sex with her. They used her and defiled her so much that finally she became disgusted with them. She exposed herself publicly and let every one know she was a whore. I was as disgusted with her as I had been with her sister. She became more of a prostitute than ever, acting just as she did as a girl, when she was a prostitute in Egypt. She was filled with lust for oversexed men who had all the lustfulness of donkeys or stallions.

That a husband who has the power to instantly bring them back to fidelity should allow his chosen wives to persist in such conduct is itself a surprise. As is the remedy that God says He eventually adopted. He becomes angry with them, and eventually He tells them, "Because I am angry with you, I will let them [the lovers] deal with you in their anger. They will cut off your nose and your ears and kill your children. Yes, they will take your sons and daughters [but they are as much God's own children too] and burn them alive...."

He is their husband. *He* is the one who has chosen them to be His wives. *He* is the one who has all the power to bring them back from sin in an instant. *He* is the one who does not use this irresistible, incomparable and unique power, and instead lets them persist in whoredom. But as for responsibility, *He* pastes it all on the wives! He tells Oholibah,

> I will hand you over to the people you hate and are disgusted with. And because they hate you, they will take away everything you have worked for and leave you stripped naked, exposed like a prostitute. *Your lust and your prostitution have brought this on you. You* were a prostitute and defiled yourself with their idols. *You* followed in your sister's footsteps, and so I will give you the same cup of punishment to drink.... Because *you* forgot Me and turned your back on Me, you will suffer for your lust and prostitution.

God proceeds to describe all over again to His prophet their infidelity and vulgarity. And then commands,

> Bring the mob to terrorize them and rob them. Let the mob stone them and attack them with swords, kill their children, and burn down their houses. Throughout the land I will put a stop to immorality, as a warning to every woman not to commit adultery as they did. And you two sisters – I will punish you for your immorality and your sin of worshipping idols.

And what would have been accomplished?

> *Then you will know that I am the Sovereign Lord....*[10]

One day, the Lord God tells His chosen prophet, "Mortal man [His customary way of addressing Ezekiel], with one blow I am going to take away the person you love most." That evening Ezekiel's wife suddenly dies. Now, Ezekiel had done no wrong, much less his poor wife. What was the purpose of killing her suddenly? The killing was strange indeed. Once the person you love most, dies, the Lord God told Ezekiel, you will not mourn, you will not show any sign of mourning either. People in general will do the same when the Lord profanes the Temple, and brings other suffering on them – they too will not mourn or show any sign of mourning. "Then", the prophet explained, "I will be a sign to you; you will do everything I have done." But what purpose will be served by these twin demonstrations – of suffering being brought on both, the prophet as well as the people, and neither mourning in any way? The hapless prophet, whose wife had just been killed, explained:

> The Lord says that when this happens, *you will know that He is the Sovereign Lord.*[11].

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[10] *Ezekiel,* 23.1-49.
[11] *Ezekiel.* 24.15-24.

The Lord God has set many nations to destroy Jerusalem, and kill His chosen people. The people of Tyre are exultant – of course, we have only the Lord God's testimony for that. "Jerusalem is shattered!", they exclaim. "Her commercial power is gone! She won't be our rival any more." That exultation, like almost everything other than His adoration, sends the Lord God into His usual fury. "I, the Sovereign Lord, am saying: I am your enemy," He declares. And over the next 2500 words He describes the ruin and devastation He is arranging for Tyre. And what will be accomplished after the city is laid low?

> *Then Tyre will know that I am the Lord.*[12]

And then He turns on Sidon: "I am your enemy, Sidon," He thunders, "people will praise Me because of what I do to you. They will know that I am the Lord, when I show how holy I am by punishing those who live in you. I will send diseases on you and make blood flow in your streets." When all the nations – whom He had set upon His chosen people, and who accordingly had inflicted the punishment He had decreed – are laid waste, He says,

> *they will know that I am the Sovereign Lord.*[13]

And then He turns on Egypt. Because you, the king of Egypt, said that the Nile is yours and you made it, God says, I am your.enemy. And He proceeds to decree devastation and ruin on the king, the country, and all the people in it. Once it is carried out, He says in anticipatory triumph,

> *Then you will know that I am the Lord.*[14]

He elaborates the horrors He has decreed for Egypt for

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[12] *Ezekiel*, 26-28. [13] *Ezekiel*, 28.20-24. [14] *Ezekiel*, 29.9.

another 500 words, punctuating the gory description with the refrain,

> *When I punish Egypt in this way, they will know that I am the Lord.... I will scatter the Egyptians throughout the world. Then they will know that I am the Lord.... When I make Egypt a desolate waste and destroy all who live there, they will know that I am the Lord.*[15]

The fate that He will visit on Egypt will also remind His chosen people how wrong they were in turning to Egypt for help, He says,

> *Then Israel will know that I am the Sovereign Lord.*[16]

And then He turns on His chosen people. You do this wrong, you commit that sin, He thunders, you worship idols.... And so I will ruin your cities, I will kill every one in them....,

> *When I punish the people for their sins and make the country a waste, then they will know that I am the Lord.*[17]

And then He turns on Edom and its people – another lot He had set to kill and pillage His chosen people for worshipping idols, etc. He is now furious with Edom and every one residing in it, indeed with every one who may traverse its mountains. The reason? That they became the enemies of His chosen people, that they let His chosen people be slaughtered! The usual blood-soaked punishments are decreed: "....*Then you will know that I am the Lord....* I will make the hill-country of Edom a waste and kill every one who travels through it. I will cover the mountains with corpses, and the bodies of those who are killed in battle will cover the hills and valleys. I will make you desolate for ever, and no one will live in your cities again,

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[15]*Ezekiel*, 30.19, 26; 32.15. [16]*Ezekiel*, 29.16. [17]*Ezekiel*, 33.29.

Then you will know that I am the Lord."[18]

More destruction....,

Then every one will know that I am the Lord.[19]

Having destroyed all others, He says, He will redeem His chosen people. Why? The answer is the same as the explanation for His inflicting such suffering on them! You have disgraced My holy name, He tells the chosen people. You have been ritually unclean like a woman in her monthly period. You have worshipped idols. I, therefore, had to punish you by scattering you the world over. But that had a result He had not anticipated: "Wherever they went," the Lord God laments, "they brought disgrace to My holy name, because people would say, 'These are the people of the Lord, but they had to leave His land.' *That made Me concerned for My holy name....*"

So, I will rehabilitate you, He says, but remember, "What I am going to do is not for the sake of you Israelites, *but for the sake of My holy name,* which you have disgraced in every country where you have gone. When I demonstrate to the nations the holiness of My great name – the name you disgraced among them – *then they will know that I am the Lord.* I, the Sovereign Lord, have spoken. *I will use you to show the nations that I am holy....*"[20] He proceeds to describe how He will gather them up and take them back to the land from which He has expelled them, and how prosperity and the rest will again be theirs. He reminds them, "Israel, I want you to know that I am not doing all this for your sake. I want you to feel the shame and disgrace of what you are doing...." He is rehabilitating them to rehabilitate His holy name among peoples among whom they have disgraced it by getting dispersed by His decree. And there will be the boon:

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[18]*Ezekiel,* 35.1-9. [19]*Ezekiel,* 35.15. [20]*Ezekiel,* 36.16-23.

> *Then the neighbouring nations that have survived will know that I, the Lord, rebuild ruined cities and replant waste fields....*[21]

And I will help My chosen people become prosperous again, their cities which are now in ruins – by His order – will teem with people again, the land will be full of sheep,

> *Then they will know that I am the Lord.*[22]

The Lord God takes His prophet to a valley covered with dry bones. He asks the prophet to repeat to the bones what He is saying, "I am going to put breath in you and bring you back to life. I will give you sinews and muscles, and cover you with skin. I will put breath into you and bring you back to life.

> *Then you* [the bones] *will know that I am the Lord.*"[23]

His chosen people are like these bones, the Lord God tells Ezekiel. He is going to take them up and bring them back to the land from which He has turned them out. "When I open the graves where My people are buried and bring them out, *they will know that I am the Lord.* I will put My breath in them, bring them back to life, and let them live in their own land. *Then they will know that I am the Lord.*"[24]

I will send Gog to kill My people, God declares. On the day he invades them "I will be furious," God declares. And so "I will terrify Gog with all sorts of calamities. I, the Sovereign Lord, have spoken. His men will turn their swords against one another. I will punish him with disease and bloodshed. Torrents of rain and hail, together with fire and sulphur, will pour down on him and his army and on the many nations that are on his side. *In this way I will show all the nations that I am great and that I am holy. They will know then that I am the Lord.*"[25]

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[21] *Ezekiel,* 36.24-36. [22] *Ezekiel,* 36.37-38.
[23] *Ezekiel,* 37.4-6. [24] *Ezekiel,* 37.11-14. [25] *Ezekiel,* 38.18-23

He decrees further bloodshed, He decrees further death and destruction. He commands His prophet,

> Mortal man, call all the birds and animals to come from all round to eat the sacrifice I am preparing for them. It will be a huge feast on the mountains of Israel, where they can eat meat and drink blood. They are to eat the bodies of the soldiers and drink the blood of the rulers of the earth, all of whom will be killed like rams or lambs or goats or fat bulls. When I kill these people like sacrifices, the birds and animals are to eat all the fat they can hold and to drink blood until they are drunk. At My table they will eat all they can hold of horses and their riders and of soldiers and fighting men. I, the Sovereign Lord, have spoken.[26]

What is the purpose of all this? The compassionate, merciful Lord God of the Bible explains:

> *I will let the nations see My glory and show them how I use My power to carry out My just decisions....*[27]

And after all the carnage,

> *In order to show the many nations that I am holy,* I will bring My people back from all the countries where their enemies live. *Then My people will know that I am the Lord their God....*[28]

King Hezekiah is mortally ill. The Lord God sends the prophet Isaiah to tell him to put his affairs in order as he is not going to recover. Despondent, Hezekiah turns his face to the wall. He prays to the Lord: remember that I have served You faithfully and loyally, he says, I have always tried to do what You wanted me to do.... The Lord grants him fifteen years more. And assures him, "I will rescue you and this city of Jerusalem from the emperor of Assyria [whom the Lord has Himself set upon them]. I will defend this city...." Why? "*For the sake of My honour* and because of the promise I made to My servant David."[29]

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[26] *Ezekiel*, 39.17-20.
[27] *Ezekiel*, 39.21.
[28] *Ezekiel*, 39.27-28.
[29] *2 Kings*, 20.1-6.

He is in rage again. This time all nations of the world are the butt of His anger. He declares,

> Now I will act. *I will show how powerful I am.* You make worthless plans and everything you do is useless. My spirit is like a fire that will destroy you. You will crumble like rocks burnt to make lime, like thorns burnt to ashes. Let every one near and far hear what I have done and *acknowledge My power.*[30]

The Lord chooses Cyrus to be king. He appoints him to conquer nations, to strip other kings of their power. Why? The Lord gives Cyrus, and through him us, the by-now familiar answer:

> I am the Lord: there is no other god.
> I will give you the strength you need,
> although you do not know Me.
> I do this *so that every one*
> *from one end of the world to the other*
> *may know that I am the Lord*
> *and that there is no other god....*[31]

When He has decreed war, starvation, decimation at the hands of the king of Babylonia, His chosen people are distraught: the city will fall into the hands of the king of Babylonia, they moan. But I have also decided, He tells His prophet, Jeremiah, that, having afflicted them with all these dire punishments, I am going to gather them up, and bring them back to the land I have promised their ancestors. And I will let them live in safety. And what would have been accomplished by these endless rounds of suffering and rehabilitation? The Lord explains,

> Then they will be My people, and I will be their God. *I will give them a single purpose in life: to honour Me for all time,* for their own good and the good of their descendants. I will make an eternal

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[30] *Isaiah*, 33.10-13. [31] *Isaiah*, 45.5-6.

> covenant with them. I will never stop doing good things for them, and *I will make them fear Me with all their heart, so that they will never turn away from Me....*[32]

A consuming passion! An obsession! An obsession for *what*!

- *This* is the Lord without accepting whom, we are all damned to eternal hell.
- It is for *this* Lord that our missionaries are striving so hard to harvest our souls.
- *This* is the Lord who is their Almighty improvement over our Rama and Krishna....

[32]*Jeremiah*, 32.36-41.

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"Kill," He commands, "Destroy", they kill, they destroy, He kills them for killing, for destroying!

Joshua defeats the Amorites, he has their kings dragged out of a cave, and kills them himself. He wreaks the same annihilation on Makkedah. Then on Libnah. Then on Lachish. Then on Eglon. Then on Hebron. Then on Debir. Then on Hazor. It isn't that he is particularly cruel. He inflicts this carnage because *the Lord has commanded him to destroy these peoples and kill their kings.*[1]

But it isn't just that the Lord God has ordered this carnage. He has so arranged things that the people He has asked Joshua to annihilate, shall insist on putting themselves up for slaughter! On the one hand the Lord God ordered Joshua to kill them, and on the other, says the Bible, *"The Lord had made them determined to fight the Israelites so that they would be condemned to total destruction and all be killed without mercy....*"[2]

The people of one city after another are exterminated as a result. But the Lord God deliberately spares five Philistine cities and their people. Why? "So then", the Bible tells us, "the Lord left some nations in the land *so as to test the Israelites who had not been through the wars in Canaan. He did this only to teach each generation of Israelites about war, especially those who had not been in battle before.*" People of those five cities, the Bible states, *"were to be a test for Israel,*

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[1]*Joshua*, 10, 11. [2]*Joshua*, 11.20.

to find out whether or not the Israelites would obey the commands that the Lord had given their ancestors through Moses...." To no avail! The chosen people settle among the Canaanites and the rest, they intermarry, and, of course, desert the Lord God, and revert to those hated idols ![3] The Lord their God is properly enraged, and unleashes the furies on His chosen people....

He chooses people so that they will honour Him, and Him alone. He arranges – for nothing happens except at His command – that they fail to do so. He sets others to kill and ruin them. Then He arranges to have these others killed for having killed and scorned His chosen people. But He contrives to leave some people as a test for the chosen people. They fail the test. He then sets still others to kill and pillage.... He then takes pity on His chosen people, and sets the ones he had arranged to kill His chosen ones to instead start attacking and killing each other....[4]

He chooses a prophet. The prophet's sons begin to sin. The prophet admonishes them. They persist. Why? Because *the Lord God has decided to kill them*. As the Bible explains, *"But they would not listen to their father, for the Lord had decided to kill them."*[5] Who then is responsible? The father – in spite of the fact that he tried his best to wean away his sons from the sins? The sons – in spite of the fact that they continued to sin because the Lord God had contrived to have them continue to do so? Or the Lord God Himself who arranged it all?

The Lord God sets Baasha to annihilate King Jeroboam's family, He commands him to spare none in it. And then He has the entire family of Baasha annihilated, not just because Baasha too reverted to those hateful idols and gods, "but also because he killed Jeroboam's family."[6]

The Lord God makes his prophets lie, He decrees murders,

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[3] *Judges*, 3.1-6.
[4] *Judges*, 7.21-22.
[5] *1 Samuel*, 2.25.
[6] *1 Kings*, 16.7.

He beguiles devotees of other gods to gather in the Temple so that there He can have them slaughtered *en masse*....

His prophets pick up the habit from Him. King Ahaziah falls off his balcony. He is seriously injured. Elijah, the prophet, forecasts that the king will die. The king dispatches his men to fetch Elijah. The men reach Elijah. "Man of God," the officer in charge of the men addresses him, "the king orders you to come down." "If I am a man of God," Elijah answers, "may fire come down from heaven and kill you and your men." "At once fire came down and killed the officer and his men," the Bible reports. The sequence is repeated with the next batch.[7] What wrong had the officer and his men done?

Elijah passes away. Elisha is the prophet now. He is going to Bethel. "On the way some boys came out of a town and made fun of him," the Bible reports. "Get out of here baldy," they shout. "Elisha turned round," says the Bible, "and cursed them in the name of the Lord. Then two she-bears came out of the woods *and tore forty two of the boys to pieces*."[8] What an example in tolerance!

As usual the one who has been made king by the grace of the Lord God betrays Him and reverts to practices that are designed to disgust Him. God now anoints Jehu as king. And has the prophet convey the following message to Jehu:

> I anoint you king of My people Israel. *You are to kill your master the king*, that son of Ahab, so that I may punish Jezebel for murdering My prophets and My other servants. All Ahab's family and descendants are to die; *I will* get rid of every male in his family, young and old alike. *I will* treat his family *as I did the families of king Jeroboam of Israel* and king Baasha of Israel. Jezebel will not be buried; her body will be eaten by dogs....[9]

Notice, who will do all this? *I will*, says the Lord God, *I will*, He declares again and again. But the moment it comes to

[7] *2 Kings*, 1.9-12. [8] *2 Kings*, 2.23-24. [9] *2 Kings*, 9.6-10.

bearing responsibility for the murders, He executes a role reversal! Here God unambiguously acknowledges that *He* is the one who brought death on to the family of Jeroboam: "I will treat his family *as I did the families of king Jeroboam of Israel*" – and just a little earlier, as we have seen, He had Baasha and his entire family killed *for killing the family of Jeroboam*!

Jehu carries out the murders with zest, with messianic cruelty. But in doing so he is just executing what has been decreed by the Lord God. "Throw her down", he shouts at the palace officials who are gazing at him from the palace windows. "They threw her [Jezebel] down," the Bible records, "and her blood spattered the wall and the horses. Jehu drove his horses and chariot over her body. Only then did he say, 'Take that damned woman and bury her; after all, she is a king's daughter.'" The Lord God is quick to show that it is *His* hand which is behind the proceedings: for when the men go to bury her they find "nothing except her skull, and the bones of her hands and her feet." When they report this to Jehu, he tells them, "This is what the Lord said would happen, when He spoke through His servant Elijah: 'Dogs will eat Jezebel's body in the territory of Jezreel. Her remains will be scattered there like dung, so that no one will be able to identify them.'"[10]

The killing of this queen is just the beginning. Jehu, the one chosen by God, writes to the controllers of Samaria. "Bring the heads of king Ahab's descendants to me at Jezereel by this time tomorrow," he tells them. They kill all the seventy descendants of Ahab, put their heads in baskets and send them to Jehu, the one chosen by God for carrying forward His plan. Jehu tells the people, "....*The Lord has done* what He promised through His prophet Elijah." Nor is that the end. "Then Jehu put to death all the other relatives of Ahab living

[10] *2 Kings*, 9.32-37.

in Jezreel, and all his officers, close friends, and priests; not one of them was left alive," the Bible records. Jehu leaves Jezreel to go to Samaria. On the way he encounters relatives of the late king Ahaziah of Judah. Unsuspecting, they reveal their identity. "Take them alive", Jehu shouts. They are seized. "And he [Jehu] put them to death near a pit there. There were forty-two people in all, and not one of them was left alive." Next, he encounters Jonadab, son of Rechab. "Come with me and see for yourself how devoted I am to the Lord," the Bible has him telling Jonadab. "And they rode on together to Samaria," it says. "When they arrived there, Jehu killed all of Ahab's relatives, not sparing even one of them." "This is what the Lord had told Elijah would happen," the Bible notes with evident satisfaction.[11]

The conduct of the one who has been chosen and anointed by the Lord Himself. Even if the killings had to be carried out so that, what the Lord God had said would happen happened, surely, no one is any wiser why the Lord made those dire predictions in the first place, or heaped those dire curses on the victims. Nor is it enough to say that all this killing was to punish people: the Bible has no explanation as to why the Lord God did not choose some more direct method of converting the victims to the correct path.

Nor does Jehu stop there. He calls the people together, and tells them that, while Ahab had served the god Baal a little, he, Jehu, would serve him a great deal more. He orders them all – the people who believe in him, the prophets and priests of Baal – to gather at their temple to witness a great sacrifice to god Baal. And when they are all gathered, he orders the guards, "Go in and kill them all; don't let anyone escape." The guards go in, and kill all of them. And then they go into the inner sanctuary of the Temple, bring out the sacred pillar, and burn it. The Bible's account concludes with

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[11] *2 Kings,* 10.1-17.

a note of triumph: "So they destroyed the sacred pillar and the Temple and turned the Temple into a latrine – which it still is today."

Honourable conduct? Conduct worthy of one chosen by the Lord? In any event, in this way, says the sacred Bible, the worship of Baal is wiped out of God's chosen land. The verse has but to finish, and Baal and others take their revenge! For, having done all this on the command of God, that very Jehu takes to worshipping gold bull-calves, sending the Lord God into another bout of rage![12]

Recall how the Assyrian emperor, Sennacherib, laid city after city waste. Eventually he advances on king Hezekiah of Judah. The emperor encircles the cities of Judah, and conquers them. Hezekiah sends him tribute. Sennacherib is not satiated. Hezekiah turns to the Lord God for protection. The Lord reassures him. He misleads Sennacherib by circulating a rumour. And "that night an angel of the Lord went to the Assyrian camp," the Bible tells us, "and killed 185,000 Assyrian soldiers. At dawn, the next day, there they lay, all dead...." The Assyrian emperor retreats, Judah is spared.

A familiar demonstration of the Lord's power. But who had set Sennacherib to destroy the cities in the first place? In saying that Sennacherib's boast of his own prowess has been wrong, the Lord God also incidentally discloses who the real author of that vast carnage had been. He tells the emperor,

> ....You have been disrespectful to Me, the holy God of Israel. You sent your messengers to boast to Me that with all your chariots you had conquered the highest mountains of Lebanon. You boasted that there you cut down the tallest cedars and the finest cypress-trees and that you reached the deepest parts of the forests. You boasted that you dug wells and drank water in foreign lands and that the feet of your soldiers tramped the River Nile dry.
> Have you never heard that *I planned this long ago?* And now *I* have

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[12] *2 Kings*, 10.18-31.

> carried it out. *I* gave you the power to turn fortified cities into piles of rubble....[13]

"Keep watching the nations round you," the Lord tells His chosen people, "and you will be astonished at what you see. I am going to do something that you will not believe when you hear about it." Who is going to do it? On His own testimony, *He, the Lord God is going to do it*. What is He going to do? The Lord elucidates: *"I am bringing the Babylonians to power,* those fierce, restless people...."[14] *"I will punish* the people of Jerusalem and Judah," He declares. *"I will destroy* the last trace of Baal there.... *I will destroy* anyone who goes up on the roof and worships the sun, the moon, and the stars. *I will destroy* those who worship Me, but then take oaths in the name of the god Molech. *I will destroy* those who have turned back and no longer follow Me or ask Me to guid· them."[15] Who will? "*I* will," the Lord God affirms again and again. *"The Lord is preparing to sacrifice His people and has invited enemies to plunder Judah,"* the Bible informs us. And the Lord adds, "On that day of slaughter, *I will punish* the officials, the king's sons, and all those who practice foreign customs. *I will punish* all those who worship like pagans and who steal and kill in order to fill their master's house with loot."[16] Not satisfied, He enlarges His resolve: *"I will bring such disasters on mankind* that *every one* will grope about like a blind man. They have sinned against Me, and now their blood will be poured out like water, and their dead bodies will lie rotting on the ground."[17] He proceeds to state clearly that *He* is going to mete havoc on the people of Moab, on those of Ammon, then Sudan, Assyria....[18]

So, first God chooses one set as the people who will always honour Him, and Him alone – why He is so obsessed as having them do so is of course never explained. Then He

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[13] *2 Kings,* 19.20-26.
[14] *Habakkuk,* 1.5-6.
[15] *Zephaniah,* 1.2-6.
[16] *Zephaniah,* 1.7-9.
[17] *Zephaniah,* 1.17.
[18] *Zephaniah,* 2.8-15.

contrives their mentality in such a way that they will *not* do so. For their sin, He sends in the armies of sundry cities to crush them. These armies and kings do so. Then He dispatches the Assyrian emperor and his armies to reduce those cities to rubble. Then He plants pride in the heart of the emperor. And for that pride in the heart of the emperor, He kills off 185,000 poor soldiers – who are not even alleged to have had any pride or other vice. In the course of chastising the emperor, God discloses that *He,* and not the emperor, has been the author of the devastation which has been inflicted far and wide. That being the case, the emperor is hardly the one who ought to be punished. His soldiers certainly are not. And yet, the soldiers are killed, the emperor is....

Soon, far from feeling any sense of responsibility for the horrors by which vast numbers have been successively crushed, He is celebrating the fall of Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrians! "The Lord God tolerates no rivals," the Bible tells us, "he punishes those who oppose Him," – surely, not just those who oppose Him but also, indeed specially those who carry out His commands – "in His anger He pays them back."[19] The Assyrians having done the work He has assigned to them, He declares, "I am your enemy. I will burn up your chariots. Your soldiers will be killed in war, and I will take away everything that you took from others...."[20] He breaks into song:

> Doomed is the lying, murderous city,
> full of wealth to be looted and plundered.
> Listen! The crack of the whip,
> the rattle of wheels,
> the gallop of horses,
> the jolting of chariots!
> Horsemen charge,
> swords flash, spears gleam!

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[19] *Nahum,* 1.2. [20] *Nahum,* 2.13.

Corpses are piled high,
dead bodies without number –
men stumble over them!
Nineveh the whore is being punished....
The Lord Almighty says,
'I will punish you, Nineveh!
I will strip you naked
and let the nations see you,
see you in all your shame.
I will treat you with contempt
and cover you with filth....[21]

Where else do we find such celebration of piles of corpses? Perhaps in one set of books alone – Islamic histories of the Islamic conquest of India.

But even that is not the end. Having laid waste those whom He had set to lay His own people waste, the Lord God sets the stage for the next round of carnage. "I have wiped out whole nations," He says, "I have destroyed their cities and left their walls and towers in ruins." Notice both: the "who will?", "I will" point-counterpoint, as well as what appears to be pride and satisfaction at the destruction He has caused. In a moment, it turns into self-pity! "The cities are deserted," the Lord notes, "the streets are empty – no one is left. I thought that then My people would have reverence for Me and accept My discipline, that they would never forget the lesson I taught them. But soon they are behaving as badly as ever."[22]

His remedy is the familiar one: "Just wait", He screams. "Wait for the day when I rise to accuse the nations. I have made up My mind to gather the nations and kingdoms, in order to let them feel the force of My anger. The whole earth will be destroyed by the fire of My fury...."[23]

Pride and longing apart, even the threat turns out to have been an empty one: the Lord God is not the only one who is

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[21]*Nahum*, 3.1-7. [22]*Zephaniah*, 3.6-7. [23]*Zephaniah*, 3.8.

reverenced today, and yet "the whole earth" has not been destroyed!

We get an even clearer account of the sequence of events, and of where the responsibility for them rests in Isaiah. The Lord God frets and fumes at the faithlessness of His chosen people. He decides to wreak havoc on them. He, as the Bible records, "has stirred up their enemies to attack them." His fury is such that it is not going to be assuaged soon, we learn: "And so the Lord will not let any of the young men escape, and He will not show pity to any of the widows and orphans, because *all* the people are godless and wicked and *everything* they say is evil...."[24] Other things apart, does this not speak to God's total ineffectiveness – that of His chosen people "*all* the people are godless and wicked and *everything* they say is evil"? In any event, hunger, pestilence, war – He decrees them all. Indeed, He curses the people to such extreme hardship that they are eating their children.[25] That fate the Lord God visits repeatedly on His people, and all for that singular aim, that they honour Him and Him alone: the Lamentations are an extended wail about what has been visited on the hapless people,

> ....Those who died in the war were better off
> than those who died later,
> who starved slowly to death, with no
> food to keep them alive.
> The disaster that came to My people
> brought horror;
> loving mothers boiled their own
> children for food....[26]

Notice the tone: the disaster is spoken of as something that has descended on the benighted people of its own accord, and not by the agency of the Lord God! But, fortunately

[24] *Isaiah*, 9.11-17. [25] *Isaiah*, 9.19-21. [26] *Lamentations*, 4.9-10.

from the point of view of our seeing His nature, the Lord God is too possessive to let the credit for the suffering lie unappropriated! So, we soon hear Him proclaiming again,

> ....You [His chosen people] have followed the customs of other nations. And so I, the Sovereign Lord, am telling you that *I am your enemy. I* will pas., judgment on you where all the nations can see it. Because of all the things you do that I hate, *I* will punish Jerusalem as I have never done before and will never do again. As a result, parents in Jerusalem will eat their children, and children will eat their parents. *I* will punish you and scatter in every direction any who are left alive....[27]

And whom does He decide to use for carrying out His plan?

"Assyria", He announces, "I use Assyria like a club to punish those with whom I am angry. I sent Assyria to attack a godless nation, people who have made Me angry. I sent them to loot and steal and trample the people like dirt in the streets."[28] The emperor and armies of Assyria proceed to do just this. While the people are being trampled, while they are reduced to eating their children, what is our Lord God's preoccupation, what is His concern?

He is upset that the emperor is claiming that he, the emperor, is the author of the havoc, that he, the emperor, is the one who has power. It is to this that the Lord addresses Himself: "Can an axe claim to be greater than the man who uses it?," He demands. "Is a saw more important than the man who saws with it? A club doesn't lift up a man; a man lifts up a club."[29]

Infuriated with His own people, the Lord God has set the Assyrians to trample them. Now He tells His people, reeling as they are under the Assyrian heel, "Do not be afraid of the Assyrians, even though they oppress you as the Egyptians used to do. In only a little while I will finish punishing you,

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[27] *Ezekiel*, 5.8-10. [28] *Isaiah*, 10.5-6. [29] *Isaiah*, 10.15.

and then I will destroy them. I, the Lord Almighty, will beat them with My whip as I beat the people of Midian at the Rock of Oreb. I will punish Assyria as I punished Egypt...."[30]

"I will bring disaster on the earth," He shouts, "and punish all the wicked people for their sins. I will humble everyone who is proud and punish everyone who is arrogant and cruel" – but who can equal Him in pride, in arrogance, most of all in cruelty? "Those who survive will be scarcer than gold. I will make the heavens tremble, and the earth will be shaken out of its place on that day when I, the Lord Almighty, show My anger."[31] True enough. But how come the One who can make the heavens tremble and the earth shake out of its place cannot get puny little men to honour Him? How come He is so ineffectual, so repeatedly a failure in getting these ordinary, timorous mortals to obey His dictates?

Incensed, the Sovereign Lord turns on Babylon and its people – the very ones He has set upon the people of Judah. "The foreigners living in Babylon will run away to their own countries.... Anyone who is caught will be stabbed to death. While they look on helplessly, their babies will be battered to death, their houses will be looted, and their wives will be raped.... I am stirring up the Medes to attack Babylon.... With their bows and arrows they will kill the young men. They will show no mercy to babies and take no pity on children. Babylon is the most beautiful kingdom; it is the pride of its people. But I, the Lord, will overthrow Babylon as I did Sodom and Gomorrah. No one will ever live there again...." "I will attack Babylon and bring it to ruin," He exults. "I will leave nothing – no children, no survivors at all. I, the Lord, have spoken. I will turn Babylon into a marsh, and owls will live there. I will sweep Babylon with a broom that will sweep everything away...."[32]

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[30] *Isaiah*, 10.24-27. [31] *Isaiah*, 13.11-13.
[32] *Isaiah*, 13.14-22; 14.22-23.

And then on Moab: "...Yes, there will be a bloody slaughter of everyone left in Moab," He declares.[33]

And then on Damascus and the people of Syria.

And then on Sudan and its people who too have committed the sin of obeying His design and pillaging His chosen people.

And then on Egypt.

And then on the tribes of Arabia.

And of course once again on the people of Jerusalem....

And then on Tyre and its inhabitants. Then on Sidon and its inhabitants.[34]

And then on the entire earth, on all nations: "The Lord is angry with *all the nations* and their armies. He has condemned them to destruction. Their corpses will not be buried, but will lie there rotting and stinking; and the mountains will be red with blood. The sun, moon, and stars will crumble to dust. The sky will disappear like a scroll being rolled up, and the stars will fall like leaves dropping from a vine or a fig-tree...."[35]

It isn't just that He causes such enormous, endless suffering. He is proud that He, and no one else has caused it. Amidst the fire and brimstone of Jeremiah, we read,

> ....You people have rejected Me;
> you have turned your backs to Me.
> So *I* stretched out My hand and crushed you
> because I was tired of controlling My anger.

– what a reason!

> In every town in the land
> *I* threw you to the wind like straw.
> *I* destroyed you, My people,
> *I* killed your children
> because you did not stop your evil ways.

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[33] *Isaiah*, 15.1-9. [34] *Isaiah*, 15-34. [35] *Isaiah*, 24; 34.

There are more widows in your land
than grains of sand by the sea.
I killed your young men in their prime
and made their mothers suffer.
I suddenly struck them
with anguish and terror....
I will let your enemies kill
those of you who are still alive.
I, the Lord, have spoken.[36]

What an achievement! Can there be any doubt about who is culpable? Who is guilty of heaping such unspeakable suffering on such vast numbers?

Notice too that each turn of cruelty is premeditated. It isn't just that the Lord God owns up to the cruelties in retrospective passages as the foregoing. He announces them to and through His prophets as afflictions He will be sending down in the future:

I, the Lord, the God of Israel, say that the houses of Jerusalem and the royal palace of Judah *will be* torn down as a result of the siege and the attack. Some *will* fight against the Babylonians, who *will* fill the houses with the corpses of those whom *I am going to* strike down in My anger and fury....[37]

The endless, relentless cycle

"Who can be compared to Me?" He demands, in the Me-Tarzan mode. "Who would dare challenge Me? What ruler could oppose Me?"[38] He tells Babylonia, "Babylonia, you are My hammer, My weapon of war."

I used you to crush nations and kingdoms,
to shatter horses and riders,
to shatter chariots and drivers, to kill men and women,
to slay old and young,
to kill boys and girls,

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[36] *Jeremiah*, 15.6-9. [37] *Jeremiah*, 33.4-5. [38] *Jeremiah*, 50.44.

to slaughter shepherds and their flocks,
to slaughter ploughmen and their horses,
to crush rulers and high officials.[39]

Who used whom? *"I used you,"* the Lord is telling Babylonia. And in a moment, Babylonia is being destroyed. The Lord is shouting, "Run away from Babylonia. Run for your lives. Do not be killed because of Babylonia's sin. I am now taking My revenge and punishing it as it deserves...."[40] "You will see Me repay Babylonia and its people for all *they* did to Jerusalem," He vows. "Babylonia, you are like a mountain that destroys the whole world, but I, the Lord, am your enemy. I will take hold of you, level you to the ground, and leave you in ashes. None of your stones will ever be used again for building. You will be like a desert forever. I, the Lord, have spoken."[41]

He contrived and set Babylonia to wreak havoc on Jerusalem, and suddenly, He is saying that He is going to destroy Babylonia and its people for what *they* have done to Jerusalem! He speaks to the people of Jerusalem to console them, and repeats this version: "I will take up your cause," He tells them, "and will make your enemies pay *for what they did to you*. I will dry up the source of Babylonia's water and make its rivers go dry...."[42]

By His command and design, Babylon is soon captured. He is in raptures. "....The whole country will be put to shame, and all its people will be killed. Everything on earth and in the sky will shout for joy when Babylonia falls to the people who come from the north to destroy it. *Babylonia caused the death of people all over the world,* and now Babylonia will fall *because it caused the death of so many Israelites*. I, the Lord, have spoken."[43]

He causes Edom to turn one more notch the handle of His

[39] *Jeremiah*, 51.20-23. [40] *Jeremiah*, 51.6. [41] *Jeremiah*, 51.24-26.
[42] *Jeremiah*, 51.36-39. [43] *Jeremiah*, 51.47-49.

cruel cycle. And then He pronounces the most ferocious curses on Edom and other nations. "With glee and contempt", He says, "*they* captured My land and took possession of its pastures."[44] He is all fire and fury at *them* now:

> On the day I punish Edom,
> I will destroy their clever men
> and wipe out all their wisdom....
> Because *you robbed and killed*
> your brothers, the descendants of Jacob,
> you will be destroyed and dishonoured forever....
> The day is near when I, the Lord,
> will judge all nations.
> Edom, what *you have done*
> will be done to you.
> You will get back *what you have given.*
> My people have drunk a bitter cup of punishment
> on My sacred hill.
> But all the surrounding nations will drink
> a still more bitter cup of punishment;
> they will drink it all and vanish away.[45]

And then Gog, the ruler of the nations of Meshech and Tubal. The Sovereign Lord sends His chosen prophet to direct Gog on His behalf,

> Now while My people Israel live in security, you will set out from your place in the far north, leading a large, powerful army of soldiers from many nations, all of them on horseback. You will attack My people like a storm moving across the land. When the time comes *I* will send you to invade My land in order to show the nations who I am, to show My holiness by *what I do through you*. You are the one I was talking about long ago, when I announced through My servants, the prophets of Israel, that in the days to come, *I would* bring someone to attack Israel.[46]

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[44] *Ezekiel*, 35; 36.5.
[45] *Obadiah*, 8-10, 15-16.
[46] *Ezekiel*, 38.14-17.

Even as He is asking His prophet to convey this command to Gog, He tells the prophet,

> On the day Gog invades Israel, I will be furious. I declare in the heat of My anger that on that day there will be a severe earthquake in the land of Israel.... Mountains will fall, cliffs will crumble, and every wall will collapse. I will terrify Gog with all sorts of calamities....[47]

The Lord God Himself sends king Nebuchadnezzar of Babylonia to smother Judah. *He*, the Almighty Lord, the Bible specifically tells us, "let him capture king Jehoiakim and seize some of the Temple treasures...."[48] He tells His chosen people, "I will give you back what you lost in the years when swarms of locusts ate your crops. *It was I who sent this army against you....*" He recounts what He has visited on the chosen people through several nations, and in the same breath declares, "I will destroy them *because of all they have done to you.*"[49]

Having got the varied nations to execute His plan, He vows,

> I will gather all the nations
> and bring them to the Valley of Judgment.
> There I will judge them
> *for all they have done to My people.*
> *They* have scattered the Israelites in foreign countries
> and divided up Israel, My land.
> *They* threw dice to decide
> who would get the captives.
> *They* sold boys and girls into slavery
> to pay for prostitutes and wine.[50]

"What are you trying to do to Me, Tyre, Sidon, and all the regions of Philistia?," He demands of the very people He has

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[47] *Ezekiel*, 38.18-23.
[48] *Daniel*, 1.1-2.
[49] *Joel*, 2.25, 20.
[50] *Joel*, 3.2-3.

used to kill and pillage. "Are you trying to pay Me back for something? If you are, I will quickly pay you back. *You* have taken My gold and silver and carried My rich treasures into your temples. *You* have taken the people of Judah and Jerusalem far from their own country and sold them to the Greeks. Now I am going to bring them out of the places to which *you* have sold them. *I will do to you what you have done to them.* I will let your sons and daughters be sold to the people of Judah, they will sell them to the people of far-off Sabeans. I, the Lord, have spoken."[51]

He goes down the list of each of the peoples He has used, and vows revenge:

> ....Egypt will become a desert,
> and Edom a ruined waste,
> because *they* attacked the land of Judah
> and killed its innocent people.
> I will avenge those who were killed;
> I will not spare the guilty....[52]

But *He*, the Lord, is the one who has caused the killing. If anyone is guilty it is God: it isn't just that He acknowledges in several places that He is the one who set these peoples to smother the chosen ones. On the claim of the Bible absolutely nothing – for good or for ill – happens except at His command. Hence, if the deeds of anyone deserve to be avenged, they are the deeds of the Lord God.

Having gathered several nations to attack His chosen people, He tells the latter that they should proceed to Babylon, but that they should not be afraid as He, the Lord – the very one who has set other nations to attack them – will help them. "Many nations have gathered to attack you," He announces. "They say, 'Jerusalem must be destroyed! We will see this city in ruins!' But these nations do not know what is in the Lord's mind. They do not realise that they have been

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[51] *Joel*, 3.4-8. [52] *Joel*, 3.19-21.

gathered together to be punished in the same way that corn is brought in to be threshed."[53]

And our Christian missionaries denounce Krishna and Rama as being inferior gods!

Having instigated other nations to attack the people in Jerusalem, the Lord God inflames the latter. "People of Jerusalem," He hectors, "go and punish your enemies. I will make you as strong as a bull with iron horns and bronze hoofs. You will crush many nations, and the wealth they got by violence you will present to Me, the Lord of the whole world."

The Lord God is therefore responsible for not just a few killings, not just for killing a few hundred thousand at a time, but for round upon round of massacres: He leaves His chosen ones in such an ambivalent position that they drift back to other gods; hence, He decrees that they be killed; to execute His punishment, He sets several nations on the chosen ones; those killings done, He gathers the enemies of His people together so that they may be massacred wholesale that much more easily; and to execute this round of punishment, He whips up His chosen ones. And what does He want at the end? That His chosen ones plunder the wealth that the others have accumulated – by *His* design, at *His* specific direction – and present it to Him, the Lord of the whole world!

That apart, why does the creator of the universe, the Lord of everything need such a mundane thing as plundered wealth?

He is the one who sets the time for everything, the Bible teaches us in a famous and majestic set of verses – for birth and for death, for planting and for pulling up, for killing and for healing, for tearing down and for building, for sorrow and for joy....[54] "I know that everything God does will last forever," the prophet remarks reflecting on the futility of our puny efforts. "*You can't add anything to it, or take away*

[53] *Micah*, 4.11-12.

[54] *Ecclesiastes*, 3.

anything away from it. And one thing God does is to make us stand in awe of Him. Whatever happens or can happen has already happened before. *God makes the same thing happen again and again.*"[55]

"Does disaster strike a city unless the Lord sends it?," the Bible inquires in another celebrated set of verses.[56] Again and again, the Lord proclaims Himself to have been the author and cause of the suffering that has befallen mankind, in particular the hapless people He has chosen as His own:

> *I* was the one who brought famine to all your cities, yet you did not come back to Me. *I* held back the rain when your crops needed it most. *I* sent rain on one city, but not on another. Rain fell on one field, but another field dried up. Weak from thirst, the people of several cities went to a city where they hoped to find water, but there was not enough to drink. Still you did not come back to Me.
>
> *I* sent the scorching wind to dry up your crops. The locusts ate up all your gardens and vineyards, your fig-trees and olive-trees. Still you did not come back to Me.
>
> *I* sent the plague on you like the one *I* sent on Egypt. *I* killed your young men in battle and took your horses away. *I* filled your nostrils with the stink of dead bodies in your camps. Still you did not come back to Me.
>
> *I* destroyed some of you as I destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. Those of you who survived were like a burning stick saved from a fire. Still you did not come back to Me.... So then.... I am going to punish you. And because I am going to do this, get ready to face My judgment.[57]

Notice what He is afflicting His people with all the time. Notice what He is looking out for as He does so, and as they are suffering and dying before His eyes: has this last affliction been sufficient to turn them to Me? – that is His concern.

Is *He* not the one who deserves the punishment He is inflicting on mankind?

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[55] *Ecclesiastes*, 3.14-15. [56] *Amos*, 3.3-8. [57] *Amos*, 4.6-12.

22

Ever the unrequited lover

"They love to turn away from Me," the Lord God complains, "they will not control themselves. So I am not pleased with them. I will remember the wrongs they have done and punish them because of their sins." Do not ask Me to help these people, He tells His prophet. Even if Moses and Samuel were standing here pleading with Me, I would not spare them, He declares.[1] That is typical of Him: He never forgets such wrong as others may have done – the sentence should actually read, He never forgets things others may have done which *He* has convinced Himself are wrong.

So much so that He violates the laws that He has Himself laid down. Sons shall not be punished for the sins of their fathers, He declares at great length. Each shall be held accountable for his own deeds alone.[2] But in His own case, He follows the opposite rule:

> I, the Lord, am a God who is full of compassion and pity [!], who is not easily angered [!] and who shows great love and faithfulness. I keep My promise for thousands of generations and forgive evil and sin; *but I will not fail to punish children and grandchildren to the third and fourth generation for the sins of their parents.*[3]

And He applies this rule. As we have seen, king Josiah of Judah was one of the few who did what pleased the Lord God. He smashed to bits – the exact words – the altars which were being used for pagan worship. He killed every single

[1] *Jeremiah*, 14.10-11; 15.1.
[2] *Ezekiel*, 18.1-31.
[3] *Exodus*, 34.6-7.

priest who had been conducting such worship – he made sure that they were killed on the very altars at which they had been conducting the worship. He burnt human bones at every altar. He took the symbol of the goddess, pulverized it, burnt it to ashes, and scattered the ashes over the public burial ground. But even this did not assuage the anger of the Lord God – forgiving and compassionate and full of pity though He is! Why not? Because of the sin that Josiah's *father* had committed, the Bible explains – the sin, of course, was the familiar one of not destroying pagan worship![4]

Those who do good shall be rewarded, He explains. Only those who do evil are to be punished, they are to be punished only for the evil they do themselves.[5] Yet in a moment, He is shouting to His prophet, "Mortal man, denounce Jerusalem. Denounce the places where people worship. Warn the land of Israel that I, the Lord, am saying: I am your enemy. I will draw My sword and kill *all of you, good and evil alike*. I will use My sword against *every one from north to south....*"[6]

In a word, He never forgets what He has decided is the wrong others have done. So much so that He thinks it right to kill wantonly – good as well as evil, those who have not done the wrong about which He is in rage, as much as those who are guilty of it.

But as far as His own case is concerned, He can never forget, and He will not allow anyone else to forget for a moment the good He has done! I rescued you from slavery, He keeps reminding them. I guided you through the desert, and across the sea, He keeps reminding them. I forgave you when you...., and I forgave you when you...., He keeps reminding them. I crushed your enemies, He keeps reminding them – invariably omitting to mention that *He* is the one who had set the enemies to crush the people in the first place. Ever so often the good He takes credit for consists of nothing more than a promise to do them some good in

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[4] *2 Kings*, 23.1-20, 26. [5] *Ezekiel*, 18. [6] *Ezekiel*, 21.1-4.

some undefined, indefinite future – His recurring promise being the most conspicuous example, the promise that He will ultimately bring the people He has chosen as His own to the land He once promised their ancestors.

These two traits – of never forgetting the wrongs He imagines He has been done, and of never forgetting the good He has convinced Himself He has done – combine to produce an entirely predictable psychological condition: in His eyes He is forever the one who has been wronged.

My own people have abandoned Me, He is forever lamenting. "They did not care about Me," He groans, "even though I rescued them from Egypt and led them through the wilderness, a land of deserts and sand dunes, a dry and dangerous land where no one lives and no one will even travel...." "No other nation has ever changed its gods, even though they were not real," He wails even as He is demanding that the people He has chosen change their gods and worship Him! "But My people have exchanged Me, the God who has brought them honour, for gods that can do nothing for them." "You deserted Me, the Lord your God," He moans, "while I was leading you along the way."[7] At every turn, the same complaint: I have done so much for them, they do not even do this one little thing I want of them – that they worship Me and Me alone!

He cannot, of course, deny the unspeakable calamities He has brought down on His people. But for each of these, He says, the blame lies squarely on them. "I punished you, but it did no good," He says, *"You would not let Me correct you."*[8] "Whenever I want to heal My people Israel and make them prosperous again," He laments, "all I can see is their wickedness...."[9] *"I wanted to save them,"* He maintains, "but their worship of Me was false...." "Even though I was the one who brought them up and made them strong, they plotted

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[7] *Jeremiah*, 1.16; 2.5-6, 11, 17.
[8] *Jeremiah*, 2.30. [9] *Hosea*, 7.1.

against Me. They keep on turning away from Me to a god that is powerless...."[10] – powerless that other god must be, but he does seem to have the power to always turn God's own people away from Him!

Not only is He the one who is forever wronged, He sees Himself as the one who is doubly cursed: He is eternally wronged, and yet He cannot give up loving His unfaithful flock! So sincere and steadfast does He see Himself as being! He breaks into song at His plight:

> When Israel was a child I loved him,
> and called him out of Egypt as My son.
> But the more I called him,
> the more he turned away from Me.
> My people sacrificed to Baal;
> they burnt incense to idols.
> Yet I was the one who taught Israel to walk.
> I took My people up in My arms,
> but they did not acknowledge that I took care of them.
> I drew them to Me with affection and love.
> I picked them up and held them to My cheek;
> I bent down to them and fed them.

They refuse to return to Me, He weeps. And so I must send them back to Egypt, I must have Assyria crush them. They insist on turning away from Me, He cries.[11] I have to punish you, but, and He breaks into another song of self-pity,

> How can I give you up, Israel?
> How can I abandon you?
> How could I destroy you as I did Admah,
> or treat you as I did Zeboiim?
> My heart will not let Me do it!
> My love for you is too strong.
> I will not punish you in My anger;
> I will not destroy Israel again.
> For I am God and not man.

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[10] *Hosea*, 7.13, 15.

[11] *Hosea*, 11.5, 7.

> I, the Holy One, am with you.
> I will not come to you in anger.[12]

The self-pity: "My heart will not let Me do it! My love for you is too strong"! The protestations which are the complete opposite of His unvarying record: "I will not punish you in My anger.... I will not come to you in anger." His view of Himself as the mother who does so much for her children and yet whom they disregard! If only He were an ordinary mother, some therapist would instruct Him that a mother who is forever reminding her children of the things she has done for them, is sure to lose their affection! But who can counsel therapy to the Almighty?

So extreme is this psychological complex that, having sworn eternal and inexhaustible love for His children, in a moment the Lord God is driven to denouncing them in gaudy metaphors! "You are like a wild camel on heat," He charges, "running about loose, rushing into the desert. When she is on heat, who can control her? No male that wants her has to trouble himself; she is always available at mating time...." "Look up at the hilltops," He says. "Is there any place where you have not acted like a prostitute? You waited for lovers along the roadside, as an Arab waits for victims in the desert. You have defiled the land with your prostitution." The accusation, invariably followed by another bout of self-pity:

> Israel, I wanted to accept you as My son
> and give you a delightful land,
> the most beautiful land in the world.
> I wanted you to call Me father,
> and never again turn away from Me.
> But like an unfaithful wife,
> you have not been faithful to Me.
> I, the Lord, have spoken....[13]

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[12] *Hosea*, 11.1-4, 8-9.
[13] *Jeremiah*, 2.23-24; 3.2, 19-20.

You were born of an Amorite father and a Hittite mother, He tells His chosen people – "chosen" in the sense, as will be clear by now, that He has chosen this particular lot to ensure that He will be worshipped. And He has picked them up for this purpose, He reminds them, even though they were born to an Amorite and a Hittite – people who the Israelites despised as debased idolaters. No one bothered to cut off your umbilical cord, no one bothered to even wash you when you were born. I am the one who did all this. I raised you, I made you strong. "You grew strong and tall, and became a young woman," He reminds them, drawing a picture in His mind. "Your breasts were well-formed, and your hair had grown, but you were naked."

"As I passed by again, I saw that the time had come for you to fall in love," the Lord God recalls. "I covered your naked body with My coat, and promised to love you. Yes, I made a marriage covenant with you, and you became Mine."

The Lord God continues with His word-picture:

> Then I took water and washed the blood off you. I rubbed olive-oil on your skin. I dressed you in embroidered gowns and gave you shoes of the best leather, a linen headband and a silk cloak.
> I put jewels on you – bracelets and necklaces. I gave you a nose-ring and earrings and a beautiful crown to wear.
> You had ornaments of gold and silver.... Your beauty was dazzling, and you became a queen. You became famous in every nation for your perfect beauty, because I was the one who made you lovely.[14]

Little need to put too fine a point on such accounts, but three things will be obvious. Were someone other than the Lord God painting such word-pictures, he would be pulled up for dressing and undressing someone with his mind's eye! And what would one say of a husband who is forever reminding his wife of the gifts he has bought her – not forgetting even the linen scarf, and the pair of shoes? What would one say of

[14] *Ezekiel*, 16.3-14.

a husband who does not see the natural loveliness in her but proclaims that the beauty for which she has become famous is lustrous only because *he* has dressed her up?

And then come the accusations against the "wife" He has done so much for – the other side of these being self-pity of having been wronged. The metaphors He uses for both – the people as well as for Himself – are telling: the people are the unfaithful wife, and He the aging, trusting, cuckolded husband!

"But you took advantage of your beauty and fame," the Lord God tells His chosen "wife", "to sleep with everyone who came along. You used some of your clothes to decorate your places of worship, and just like a prostitute, you gave yourself to everyone." And then a cut so unkind, He moans in self-pity,

> You took the silver and gold jewelry that I had given you, used it to make male-images, and committed adultery with them. You took the embroidered clothes I gave you and put them on the images, and you offered to the images the olive-oil and incense I had given you. I gave you food – the best flour, olive-oil, and honey – but you offered it as a sacrifice to win the favour of idols. Then you took the sons and daughters you had borne Me and offered them as sacrifices to idols. Wasn't it bad enough to be unfaithful to Me, without taking My children and sacrificing them to idols?

The question at once springs to mind: with the unfaithful wife going to such lengths – sacrificing their children, nothing less – why is it that the omnipotent Husband stood by, wallowing in self-pity instead of immediately using His limitless power to put an end to the sacrifices, the infidelities? Another of His incomprehensible mysteries. But to proceed with the Lord's lament,

> During your disgusting life as a prostitute you never once remembered your childhood – when you were naked, squirming in your own blood.

But in the Lord's reckoning, it wasn't just addiction to fornication that drove His wife to sleep with every passer-by, she did this with a definite purpose – the "purpose" that every self-pitying person sees in whatever others do: you did all this *to hurt Me*, He claims:

> You are doomed! Doomed! You did all that evil, and then by the side of every road you built places to worship idols and practice prostitution. You dragged your beauty through the mud. You offered yourself to everyone who came by, and you were more of a prostitute every day. You let your lustful neighbours, the Egyptians, go to bed with you, *and you used your prostitution to make Me angry*.

And so, says the Lord God, the forgiving compassionate Lord God, I have no alternative but to raise My hand to punish you. And what form will the punishment take? Were anyone else to describe it the way and at the length at which the Lord does, literary critics would say that the author is injecting sexual allusions gratuitously:

> Because you were not satisfied by the others, you went running after the Assyrians. You were their prostitute, but they didn't satisfy you either. You were also a prostitute for the Babylonians, that nation of businessmen, but they didn't satisfy you either....
> You have done all this like a shameless prostitute. On every street you built places to worship idols and practice prostitution.

But it isn't just that you have had an insatiable appetite, the Lord God tells His "wife", it isn't just that you have been a prostitute. Among prostitutes, you have been one of a specially depraved kind:

> But you are not out for money like a common prostitute. You are like a woman who commits adultery with strangers instead of loving her husband. A prostitute is paid, but you gave presents to all your lovers and bribed them to come from everywhere to sleep with you. You are a special kind of prostitute. No one forced you to become one. You didn't get paid; you paid them! Yes, you are different.

By now the Lord God is in full flight:

> You stripped off your clothes and, like a prostitute, gave yourself to your lovers and to all your disgusting idols, and you killed your children as sacrifices to idols. Because of this I will bring all your lovers together – the ones you liked and the ones you hated. I will bring them round you in a circle, and then will strip off your clothes and let them see you naked.

What would one say of a husband who subjects his wife to such treatment? The Lord God proceeds:

> I will condemn you for adultery and murder, and in My anger and fury I will punish you with death. I will put you in their power, and they will tear down the places where you engage in prostitution and worship idols. They will take away your clothes and leave you completely naked.
>
> They will stir up a crowd to stone you, and they will cut you to pieces with their swords. They will burn your houses down and let crowds of women see your punishment. I will make you stop being a prostitute and make you stop giving gifts to your lovers. Then My anger will be over and I will be calm. I will not be angry or jealous any more....[15]

Any husband who, having complete power to rectify the conduct of a wayward wife, does not use it will normally be taken to be deliberately letting things proceed so that he can inflict such colourful punishments on her! Moreover, notice that in the eyes of the Lord God, idolatry and prostitution are one. What then is one to say of those who are among the most ardent idolaters today – the Roman Catholics?

We have already encountered God's depiction of Himself as the old husband – the one who married two sisters, Oholah and Oholibah. They had already lost their virginity in Egypt, and had become prostitutes. Even so He married both of them. Not content with Him, they fell for the handsome young men from Assyria and Babylon, men with glittering red uniforms, and the rest.[16] That long lament is also saturated

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[15] For the foregoing, *Ezekiel*, 16.9-43.

[16] *Ezekiel*, 23.

with self-pity, with blaming others. And thence, outrage and untold punishments being flung at the sisters....

Prostitutes, prostitutes, prostitutes – that is His favourite description of the people He, in His infinite wisdom has chosen to be His special people.[17] Were it someone else, an observer would certainly infer that he has prostitutes on his mind. The observer would certainly question his judgment – the judgment which so consistently leads him to rest his hopes on a bunch so incorrigibly unfaithful. Reminded of the innumerable times the chosen people have reverted to other gods and their idols, the observer would counsel Him to examine His own conduct and worth – why is it that the people gravitate back to those other gods so persistently? May be *He* should learn something from *them*, may be *they* have some secret power which He, in spite of His high opinion of Himself, does not have....

Alas!, as He is the Lord Almighty God, no therapist dare tell Him any of this.

And so all the guilt lies with them

In a word, the theme of the Bible is twofold: the Lord God is always wanting to confer boons on the people He has chosen; wayward prostitutes that they are, they are always betraying Him.

The result is just! All guilt lies with the people who had the misfortune to have been chosen by the Lord God to have the privilege of worshipping Him and Him alone.

In Nehemiah we hear the Prayer of Confession, in which the poor chosen people acknowledge that all the blame lies with them, that the Lord God has always been yearning to shower blessings on them, but their cussedness and perversity have been such that they have repeatedly broken their promises to Him, betrayed Him, and thereby compelled

[17] *Hosea*, 4.12; 9.1.

Him to visit even more painful punishments on them.... Read the verses and decide what the mental state of people in whom guilt has been driven so deep is liable to be. The prayer recounts the infinite boons the Lord God has gone on conferring on the people, and proclaims,

But Your people rebelled and disobeyed You;
they turned their backs on Your Law.
They killed the prophets who warned them,
who told them to turn back to You.
They insulted You time after time,
so You let their enemies conquer and rule them.
In their trouble they called to You for help
and You answered them from heaven.
In Your great mercy You sent them leaders
who rescued them from their foes.
When peace returned, they sinned again,
And again You let their enemies conquer them.
Yet when they repented and asked You to save them,
in heaven You heard, and time after time
You rescued them in Your great mercy.
You warned them to obey Your teachings,
but in pride they rejected Your laws,
although keeping Your Law is the way to life.
Obstinate and stubborn, they refused to obey.
Year after year You patiently warned them.
You inspired Your prophets to speak,
but Your people were deaf,
so You let them be conquered by other nations.
And yet, because Your mercy is great,
You did not forsake or destroy them.
You are a gracious and merciful God....

And the people accept this thesis! They reply in chorus,

O God, our God, how great You are....
Remember how much we have suffered!
You have done right to punish us;
You have been faithful even though we have sinned....[18]

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[18]*Nehemiah*, 9.26-31, 32-33.

The complexes that will afflict people who internalize such a view of life and existence need hardly be elaborated. Why is it so full of sin?, the innocent Ramakrishna is said to have asked when the Bible was read to him!

The Lord God is forever full of indignation at what His chosen people have made Him do to them! In His way of looking at things *He* is the one who has been, and is being made to suffer! "Do you think I sent My people away like the man who divorces his wife?," He demands, and asks for proof: "Where, then, are the papers of divorce?" "Do you think I sold you into captivity like a man who sells his children as slaves?" "No", He thunders, "you went away captive because of *your* sins; you were sent away because of *your* crimes." "Why did My people fail to respond when I went to them to save them? Why did they not answer when I called? Am I too weak to save them?," He demands, "I can dry up the sea with a command and turn rivers into a desert, so that fish in them die for lack of water. I can make the sky turn dark, as if it were mourning for the dead"[19] – the sort of things that every polluting factory can do today.... In any case, that is exactly the point: You, the Almighty, could have done all this, You could have set the people right, yet *You* allowed Your people to continue to sin.

The Lord God repeatedly reminds His chosen people of the ruin and devastation He has visited upon their ancestors. He tells them to heed the fact that the cities He ruined are still in ruins. I ruined them, He says, "because their people had done evil and had made Me angry." In what way did they do evil, by doing what did they make Him angry? "They offered sacrifices to other gods," the Almighty explains, "and served gods that neither they nor you nor your ancestors ever worshipped." He pastes the responsibility thicker on the badgered people: "And so, I, the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, now ask *why you are doing such evil thing to*

[19]*Isaiah*, 50.1-3.

yourselves. Do you want to bring destruction on men, women, children and babies, so that none of your people will be left ? Why do you make Me angry by worshipping idols and by sacrificing to other gods?...." Have you forgotten all the wicked things that your ancestors, their wives, that you and your wives have been doing?, He demands. And yet, He complains, "to this day you have not humbled yourselves." And what humbling would find approval with the Almighty? The Lord explains, "You have not honoured Me or lived according to all the laws that I gave you and your ancestors."[20]

"Why do you Israelites want to die?," God asks His chosen people – notice His consistency in pasting the responsibility on the hapless people, "Why do *you* Israelites want to die?" "I do not want anyone to die," He claims. "Tell them", He orders His prophet, "that as surely as I, the Sovereign Lord, am the living God, I do not enjoy seeing a sinner die. I would rather see him stop sinning and live. Israel, stop the evil you are doing. Why do you want to die?"[21] These are the claims of the One who, on the testimony of the Bible itself, indeed on His own testimony as contained in His own book, the Bible, is responsible for many, many times more deaths and for much greater ruin than anyone else mentioned in the account!

But such is the fear that He instills in His devotees that they come to own the guilt! Yes, *we* are the ones who did evil, they shout. Yes, You were only being just when You punished us, they acknowledge. Yes, we deserved the pain and suffering You flung at us. They sing in chorus,

> The Lord is merciful and will not reject us forever.
> He may bring us sorrow, but His love for us is sure and strong.
> He takes no pleasure in causing us grief or pain....[22]

Quite apart from everything else, how does this abasement,

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[20]*Jeremiah,* 44.3,7-10. [21]*Ezekiel,* 18.31-32; 33.11.
[22]*Lamentations,* 3.31-33.

this *mea culpa* square with what follows just two verses later? That verse, in this very book of Almighty God, declares,

> The will of the Lord alone is always carried out.
> Good and evil alike take place at His command.[23]

Surely, the inference from that can only be that the guilt is His more than that of anyone else. But through His book, He makes the devotees internalize the exact opposite! "Why should we ever complain when we are punished for our sin?," they sing![24]

Lamentations is entirely devoted to dousing believers with guilt and blame. As are the monologues of Daniel. "I prayed to the Lord, my God," Daniel says, "and confessed to the sins of my people." He tells the Lord,

> Lord God, You are great, and we honour You. You are faithful to your covenant and show constant love to those who love You and do what You command,

Why should He need to be flattered all the time with such paeans of praise, "You are great, we honour You"? Why should the love of the Universal Father be so restricted – to those who love Him? Why should it be conditional – to those who do what He commands? But to proceed with what Daniel tells Him,

> *We* have sinned, *we* have been evil, *we* have done wrong. *We* have rejected what You commanded us to do and have turned away from what You showed us was right. *We* have not listened to Your servants the prophets, who spoke in Your name to our kings, our rulers, our ancestors, our whole nation. You, Lord, always do what is right, but *we* have always brought disgrace on ourselves.... Our kings, our rulers, our ancestors have acted shamefully and sinned against You. You are merciful and forgiving, although *we* have rebelled against You....[25]

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[23] *Lamentations*, 3.37-38.
[24] *Lamentations*, 3.39.
[25] *Daniel*, 9.4-9.

What an abject condition for the Almighty Lord to reduce His devotees to ! He chooses them – so that there may be people who will worship Him, and Him alone. Then, though capable of doing so, He deliberately does not instill this faculty – of remaining steadfast in their worship of Him – in them. And as they waver – something which, like everything else, cannot happen but by His command, He punishes them for wavering. Next, He makes them internalize the notion that they alone are to blame for what He is doing to them, that He is doing no more than mete out justice, indeed in raining down such suffering on them He is only being faithful to them – in that He is faithfully executing the covenant He had entered into with them.

The sequence has the predictable end: He does what pleases His whim of the moment, and the people, though crushed under His heel, feel grateful to Him for never forgetting them. They wallow in the conviction that they deserve what is being done to them. They spend their nights singing paeans to His justice....

The perfect crime! The murdered man dies convinced he is the murderer!

And the perfect precursor – to the Inquisition, to the interrogations in Communist States. In these also, the confessions almost invariably ended with the victim singing praises of his tormentors – of the Church, in particular of the Pope during the Inquisition; of the Communist Party, in particular of Stalin and Mao in the Soviet Union and Communist China!

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All-powerful?

It is indeed a great mystery: in the face of the unvarying record in the Bible of His consistent failure, of His unvarying, persistent ineffectualness, how has the Church, and God Himself, been able to sustain the notion that He is All-powerful? From beginning to end the narratives of the Bible, written over a thousand years, testify to one thing alone: He instructs people to worship Him alone, they swear to do so, and in less than no time revert to worshipping other gods and their idols, He brings down the harshest punishments on them, yet at the first opportunity they revert to those gods again. How does this record amount to the Lord God being All-powerful?

And this repeated cycle does not trigger even the trace of introspection! Not in God, not in the Church!

What does the Bible say was the effect of God's own, unremitting efforts to ensure the one objective which is of concern to Him – to have the people worship Him?

When Joshua is alive, the people worship the Lord God. He dies. They relapse into worshipping the Baals and Asherahs. The Lord becomes furious. He sends enemies to crush them.[1]

He sends leaders to His people so that they may overcome the enemies, and at last return to worshipping Him. Most of the leaders, the people do not obey. Some they heed – but the moment the leader is dead, they revert to worshipping Baal and Asherah.[2]

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[1] *Judges*, 2.6-15. [2] *Judges*, 2.16-20.

God therefore does not drive out the nations who had come and occupied the lands which He had reserved for His chosen people. Instead of learning from this deprivation, the people marry women of the enemy and take to worshipping the gods and goddesses of the enemy.[3] God gets furious again....

The people are freed, but again they revert to worshipping the Baals and Asherahs – this time they take to worshipping a host of others too, the gods of Syria, of Sidon, of Moab, of Ammon, of Philistia.[4] Another bout of Godly anger ensues. Enemies are sent forth. The chosen are conquered, crushed. They are persecuted for 18 years. They repent, they throw out the other gods, and start worshipping the Lord God Almighty....[5]

God personally and directly warns Solomon: if your people give their allegiance to any other god, I shall abandon the Temple.... Infatuated by his numerous wives, Solomon allows them to continue to worship their pagan gods. He himself begins to do so. God flies into His usual rage....[6]

Solomon's successor also takes to worshipping bull-calves. God curses the king through His prophet. The prophet himself disobeys God. God has him killed by a lion.

The king and his entire family are killed in accordance with the decree of God.[7]

Solomon's son, Rehoboam, too builds places of worship for gods other than the Lord, and puts up stone pillars and symbols of Asherah....[8]

His son, Abijah, succeeds Rehoboam as king of Judah. "He committed the same sins as his father and was not completely loyal to the Lord his God....," the Bible informs us. But in his case, God rewards him with a son to rule after him. God does so "because David (Abijah's great-grandfather) had done what pleased Him and had never disobeyed any of His

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[3] *Judges*, 2.21-23; 3.1-6.
[4] *Judges*, 10.6.
[5] *Judges*, 10.15.
[6] *1 Kings*, 9.
[7] *1 Kings*, 13.
[8] *1 Kings*, 14.

commands, except in the case of Uriah the Hittite."[9] By that caveat hangs a typical scandal. "One day, late in the afternoon," the Bible records, "David got up from his nap and went to the palace roof. As he walked about there, he saw a woman having a bath. She was very beautiful. So he sent a messenger to find out who she was, and learnt that she was Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam and the wife of Uriah the Hittite. David sent a messenger to fetch her: they brought her to him and he made love to her. (She had just finished her monthly ritual of purification.) Then she went back home. Afterwards she discovered that she was pregnant and sent a message to David to tell him."

By a series of manipulations, David had Uriah positioned at the front in a battle, at a position where he was bound to get killed. Uriah was in fact killed. "When Bathsheba heard that her husband had been killed, she mourned for him," the Bible concludes. "When the time of mourning was over, David sent for her to come to the palace; she became his wife and bore him a son. But the Lord was not pleased with what David had done."[10]

Nadab succeeds Jeroboam. He too sins against God and leads the chosen people to do so.[11]

Baasha finishes Nadab and his entire family. He too sins, and takes to worshipping other gods.... He as well as every member of his family is killed in accordance with God's decree....[12]

Zimri who has executed Baasha and his entire family in accordance with God's decree, the Baasha who in turn had killed Nadab and every member of his family, is able to rule for only seven days. But even in this fleeting period he sins against the Lord! And meets with just reward – he perishes in a fire....[13]

Zimri is succeeded by Omri. Omri sins more against the

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[9] *1 Kings*, 15.1-6.
[10] *2 Samuel*, 11.
[11] *1 Kings*, 15.25-30.
[12] *1 Kings*, 15.33; 16.1-6.
[13] *1 Kings*, 16.18-19.

Lord than any of his predecessors. He sins, he leads the people into committing sin and idolatry....[14]

Ahab, son of Omri, becomes king. He himself worships Baal, he himself puts up an image of Asherah.... God's anger is aroused.... He hurls a terrible drought on the people....[15]

God's prophets emulate Him. Elijah is the current prophet. He has 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah brought. He asks them to ready a bull for sacrifice. He asks them to pray to their god. They pray. There is no answer. He mocks them and their god: "Pray louder," he tells them. "He is a god. May be he is day-dreaming or relieving himself, or perhaps he has gone on a journey. Or may be he is sleeping and you have got to wake him up...." The prophets pray louder, they cut themselves with knives and daggers, "They kept ranting and raving," says that epitome of tolerance and broadmindedness, the voice of God itself, the Bible, but no answer comes.... Elijah then prepares another altar. He places wood on it. He cuts up the bull, and places it on the altar. He asks the people to pour water on the wood and the bull.

Elijah then prays to the Lord God, "prove now that You are the God of Israel and I am Your servant...." The Lord God, who has the universe to run, obviously has nothing else to do at the moment. He sends fire that burns up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones. The earth itself is scorched. Properly impressed, the people throw themselves on the ground, shouting, "The Lord is God; the Lord alone is God."

Seizing the moment, Elijah orders, "Seize the prophets of Baal; don't let any of them get away." "The people seized them all," the Bible notes with satisfaction, "and Elijah led them down to the river Kishon and killed them."[16]

Elijah is not done, though. He retreats to the wilderness, and thence he proceeds to Mount Sinai. There he tells the Lord that the people He has chosen to be His own have not

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[14] *1 Kings*, 16.25-26. [15] *1 Kings*, 16.29-33. [16] *1 Kings*, 18.18-40.

been faithful to Him. Accordingly, the Lord God decides to kill all the people leaving alive only 7,000 – those who had not bowed to Baal or kissed his idol....[17]

Ahab is king. He defeats the Syrian king and army. He enters into a treaty with the latter, and lets him go. As Ahab has done so without consulting God, and contrary to His wishes, God is furious. Ahab is now to be reckoned as another disobedient, faithless man: "Because you allowed the man to escape whom I had ordered to be killed," the Lord God with little to do, it seems, except keep interfering in West Asian politics, declares, "you will pay for it with your life, and your army will be destroyed for letting his army escape."[18]

The Bible says that "there was no one else who had devoted himself so completely to doing wrong in the Lord's sight as Ahab – all at the urging of his wife Jezebel...." Committed as He is to justice, the Lord declares that He will exterminate Ahab and every member of his family as He exterminated Jeroboam and Baasha and their families. When Elijah conveys this verdict to him, the Bible records, "Ahab tore his clothes, took them off, and put on sackcloth. He refused food, slept in the sackcloth, and went about gloomy and depressed."

That turns out to be enough for God! "Have you noticed how Ahab has humbled himself before Me?," He asks His prophet, Elijah. "Since he has done this, I will not bring disaster on him during his lifetime; it will be during his son's lifetime that I will bring disaster on Ahab's family."[19]

Ahab signs the treaty, and lets the king of Syria go. God decrees that the army of Ahab be destroyed. What wrong had the soldiers done that they are to be killed? Ahab did wrong in the eyes of the Lord: why decree disaster upon the man's son and all his family?

In any case, what is the net result of the fulminations of the

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[17] *1 Kings*, 19.5-18. [18] *1 Kings*, 20.42. [19] *1 Kings*, 21.20-29.

Lord ? Ahaziah, son of Ahab, becomes king. He rules for two years. "He sinned against the Lord," records the Bible, "following the wicked example of his father Ahab, his mother Jezebel, and king Jeroboam, who had led Israel into sin. He worshipped and served Baal, and like his father before him, he aroused the anger of the Lord, the God of Israel."[20]

Next, the Lord God orders murders. He sends one of His prophets to search out the young Jehu, and has the following command conveyed to him: "I anoint you king of Israel. You are to kill your master the king, that son of Ahab, so that I may punish Jezebel for murdering My prophets and My other servants" – the same rule of evidence: guilty-by-association! "All Ahab's family and descendants are to die; I will get rid of every male in his family, young and old alike...."[21] What wrong had these poor wretches done to merit such cruelty?

Jehu accordingly proceeds to Jezreel. Seeing Jezebel at a balcony, he orders some officers to throw her down. They do, and the Bible notes with a sense of fulfillment, "They threw her down, and her blood spattered the wall and the horses. And Jehu drove his horses and chariot over her body, entered the palace, and had a meal...." Thereafter all seventy descendants of Ahab are killed, their heads are packed in baskets and sent to Jehu, God's chosen king. And then forty-two relatives of Ahaziah are caught and killed, so that not one relative or descendant is left alive.[22]

Jehu, racing away on his chariot, picks up a potential ally. Jehu tells him, "Come with me and see for yourself how devoted I am to the Lord." "And they rode together to Samaria," the Bible records. "When they arrived there, Jehu killed all of Ahab's relatives, not sparing even one."[23] And so Jehu's devotion is established, and God's will is done!

Next, this chosen of God, tricks the devotees of Baal into

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[20] *1 Kings,* 22.51-53.
[21] *2 Kings,* 9.6-10.
[22] *2 Kings,* 9.32-37; 10.7, 14.
[23] *2 Kings,* 10.15-17.

gathering inside their temple. When they are assembled, he has each one of them butchered.[24] God is mighty pleased. He tells Jehu, "You have done to Ahab's descendants everything I wanted you to do. So I promise you that your descendants, down to the fourth generation, will be kings of Israel."[25]

Not only is the omniscient Lord God ineffectual, once again He has erred in His judgment! For, His book, the Bible itself tells us, "But he [Jehu] imitated the sin of Jeroboam, who led Israel into worshipping the gold bull-calves he set up in Bethel and in Dan...."[26]

In the other half, a queen has an entire royal family murdered. Only one little son, Joash, escapes, hidden by an aunt in the Temple of Yahweh. He ascends the throne. Idols of Baal are smashed, the altars are pulverized, the priests are killed at the altars themselves....[27] God's glory is demonstrated, His power proven.

Joash reigns. Throughout his life he does what pleases the Lord, the Bible tells us. But alas!, he does not demolish and erase all the centres of pagan worship....[28] Another demonstration of the power of someone-other-than-God-the All-powerful!

In Israel, Jehu's son, Jehoahaz becomes king. The Lord is not able to keep this king either from sinning against Him, and perpetuating the example of Jeroboam.[29]

In Judah, Joash is succeeded by his son, Amaziah. The Almighty Lord is not able to get him either to be fully zealous in exterminating pagan places of worship.[30]

Jeroboam II, the son of Jehoash ascends the throne in Israel. In his case too the Almighty Lord God fails: Jeroboam II, the Bible tells us, too "sinned against the Lord, following the wicked example of his predecessor king Jeroboam.... who led Israel into sin...."[31]

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[24] *2 Kings*, 10.18-28.
[25] *2 Kings*, 10.30.
[26] *2 Kings*, 10.29, 31.
[27] *2 Kings*, 11.
[28] *2 Kings*, 12.3.
[29] *2 Kings*, 13.2.
[30] *2 Kings*, 14.4.
[31] *2 Kings*, 14.23-24.

In Judah, Amaziah is succeeded by his son, Uzziah. He does what pleases the Lord, but he too fails the test – of erasing the pagan places of worship. And so God inflicts "a dreaded skin-disease" on him....[32]

Shallum becomes king of Israel. On his way from Tirzah, this man of God, completely destroys the city of Tappuah, its inhabitants and the surrounding territory. Why? "Because the city did not surrender to him," says the Book of God, the Bible. "He even ripped open the bellies of all the pregnant women."[33]

Uzziah is succeeded by Menahem as king of Israel. In spite of the Lord, he too sins against the Lord, and follows the wicked example of Jeroboam.[34]

Menahem is succeeded by his son, Pekahiah. He too sins against the Lord, he too follows the example of Jeroboam.[35]

In Israel, Pekah becomes king. He too sins against the Lord and chooses to follow the wicked example of Jeroboam.[36]

Jotham becomes king in Judah. He does what pleases the Lord, but in the end he too is found wanting as he too fails to heed the Lord's command and destroy all pagan places of worship thoroughly.[37]

Ahaz, Jotham's son, who succeeds him to the throne of Judah, turns out to be even more beyond the power of the All-powerful God. "He did what was not pleasing to the Lord his God and followed the example of the kings of Israel," says the Bible. "He even sacrificed his own son as a burnt-offering to idols, imitating the disgusting practice of the people whom God had driven out of the land.... At the pagan places of worship, on the hills, and under every shady tree, Ahaz offered sacrifices and burnt incense."[38]

King follows king. The people continue to elude God the All-powerful. God sets the Assyrians at them. Massacres, destruction follow.... Manasseh, still just twelve, becomes

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[32] *2 Kings*, 15.3-5.
[33] *2 Kings*, 15.16.
[34] *2 Kings*, 15.17-18.
[35] *2 Kings*, 15.23-24.
[36] *2 Kings*, 15.27-28.
[37] *2 Kings*, 15.32-35.
[38] *2 Kings*, 16.3-4.

king of Judah. All the punishments God has hurled are as if nothing. For he too sins against the Lord. Not just that – he rebuilds the pagan places of worship, he restores the altars of Baal, he makes an image of goddess Asherah! Indeed, he builds pagan shrines, and installs the image of Asherah right in the very Temple in which God has said He Himself would reside! He sacrifices his son as burnt-offering. He practises divination and magic and consults fortune-tellers, even mediums. "He sinned greatly against the Lord," says the Bible, "and stirred up His anger."[39]

And what is God's response? Another fusillade of total destruction, another totally ineffectual fusillade of total destruction – aimed, as usual, at poor people who have done nothing to deserve it. "King Manasseh has done these disgusting things....," the Lord God fumes, "and with his idols he has led the people of Judah into sin. So, I, the Lord God of Israel, will bring such disaster on Jerusalem and Judah that every one who hears about it will be stunned.... I will wipe Jerusalem clean of its people, as clean as a plate that has been wiped and turned upside down. I will abandon the people who survive, and will hand them over to their enemies, who will conquer them and plunder their land...."[40]

To no avail again! Manasseh is succeeded by his son, Amon. Of Amon, the Bible reports, "Like his father Manasseh, he sinned against the Lord; he imitated his father's actions, and he worshipped the idols that his father had worshipped. He rejected the Lord, the God of his ancestors, and disobeyed the Lord's commands."[41]

Eight years old, Josiah becomes king of Judah. He does away with pagan worship. He desecrates altars all over the country, the Bible records with approval, he smashes the idols, he kills the priests at the very altars at which they have been worshipping. One of the very rare successes of the Lord![42]

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[39] *2 Kings*, 21.2-9.

[40] *2 Kings*, 10-15.

[41] *2 Kings*, 21.20-22.

[42] *2 Kings*, 23.1-20.

Alas!, Josiah's reign comes to an end. Joahaz becomes king. And everything is back where it has always been: "Following the example of his ancestors," says the Bible, "he sinned against the Lord...."[43] Accordingly, the Egyptians invade Judah. Joahaz is taken prisoner, and carted off to Egypt. There he dies.

Jehoiakim becomes king of Judah. As usual, "Following the example of his ancestors, Jehoiakim sinned against the Lord," we learn from the Bible. God sends hosts of Babylonians, Syrians, Moabites and Ammonites to destroy Judah. Not so much because of Jehoiakim, it would seem: "This happened at the Lord's command," the Bible explains, "in order to banish the people of Judah from His sight because of all the sins that king Manaseh had committed, and specially because of all the innocent people he had killed."[44]

First, banishing people from His sight is surely an impossible task: as He sees everything everyone everywhere, where will they be banished so as to be out of His vision? Second, the punishment is being meted out in the reign of Jehoiakim who succeeded Joahaz who succeeded Josiah who succeeded Amon whose father Manasseh is the one God is ostensibly upset with: justice so delayed is misdirected, surely. Third, the punishment is for the sins of Manasseh: why is it being inflicted on the hapless people? They would surely have themselves suffered at the hands of a ruler like Manasseh. Fourth, the deed of Manasseh over which God is particularly incensed is that he killed a number of innocent persons: how does putting an even larger number of innocent people to the swords of Babylonians, and then of the Syrians, and then of the Moabites, and then of the Ammonites constitute justice for Manasseh's murders?

Jehoiakim is succeeded by Jehoiachin. He continues the well-entrenched tradition of the line. For we learn, "Following the example of his father, Jehoiachin sinned against the Lord...." The Lord sends the formidable and

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[43] *2 Kings,* 23.32. [44] *2 Kings,* 24.3-4.

cruel armies of Nebuchadnezzar to pillage Judah. All the important personages are carted off as prisoners to Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar makes Jehoiachin's uncle, Mattaniah, king of Judah. While doing so he decrees a new name for the man, Zedekiah. To what effect? "King Zedekiah sinned against the Lord as King Jehoiakim had once done," laments the Bible, and adds, "The Lord became so angry with the people of Jerusalem and Judah that He banished them from His sight."[45]

God now hurls the kings and armies successively of Babylon, Syria, Sudan, Egypt.... on the people He has chosen as His own. They rape, kill, loot.... God's aim is the same old one: to inflict such cruel punishments on His people that they shun other gods, and worship Him alone. But now another lot has to be punished – the peoples He has hurled at His chosen ones! Sometimes, as in the case of the Assyrian hordes, while God is pleased at the devastation they have wrought, He gets furious when He sees that the king of Assyria has started thinking that he, the king, rather than He, the Lord, is the author of the devastation. On other occasions, God is upset at these other peoples and kings for having done so much harm to His chosen and beloved people, albeit they have done it at His express command. Chapter after chapter in Isaiah sets out the dire fate which is visited upon these unwitting instruments of God's own design.

Scarcely a king keeps his word to the Almighty Lord God. Not one nation does either. "The time is coming," He roars, "when I will punish the people of Egypt, Judah, Edom, Ammon, Moab, and the desert people.... All these people are circumcised, but have not kept the covenant it symbolizes. *None of these people and none of the people of Israel have kept My covenant.*"[46] The Book of Amos recounts that each and every one of the people of Syria, Philistia, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, Moab, and of course the people of Judah and Israel have repudiated Him, that they have sinned against Him.

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[45] *2 Kings*, 24.8-20. [46] *Jeremiah*, 9.25-26.

"Here is a wine cup filled with My anger," God tells His faithful prophet. "Take it to all the nations to whom I send you, and make them drink it. When they drink from it, they will stagger and go out of their minds because of the war I am sending against them." Every nation on the face of the earth has to drink from it, we are told. "Tell the people that I, the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, am commanding them to drink until they are drunk and vomit, until they fall down and cannot get up, because of the war I am sending against them.... I will begin My work of destruction in My own city. Do they think they will go unpunished? No, they will be punished, for I am going to send war *on all the people of the earth*. I, the Lord Almighty, have spoken."[47]

"But I, the Lord, am tearing down what I have built and pulling up what I have planted," He proclaims. "I will do this to *the entire earth*.... I am bringing disaster *on all mankind*...."[48]

"I am going to destroy *everything on earth, all human beings and animals, birds and fish,*" God declares. "I will bring about the downfall of the wicked. I will destroy *all mankind, and no survivors will be left*. I, the Lord, have spoken." "I will bring such disasters *on mankind* that *every one* will grope about like a blind man," He continues. "They have sinned against Me, and now their blood will be poured out like water, and their dead bodies will lie rotting on the ground."[49]

One feature that is enough to turn one inside out is the wanton, endless, extreme cruelty. The other is the object to attain which this extreme suffering is hurled – just to make people worship Him. But equally telling is the fact that on His own telling, on the telling of His own book, the Bible, there is not one people whom He is able to get to do His bidding! Not one nation that takes to worshipping Him, and Him alone.

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[47] *Jeremiah*, 26.15, 26-29.
[48] *Jeremiah*, 45.4-5.
[49] *Zephaniah*, 1..2-3, 17.

Not even the people He has chosen as His own, the people He has chosen with the express purpose that at least by them He will be worshipped, that by them He alone will be worshipped.

"I, the Lord, ask you, why you refuse to listen to Me and to obey My instructions," He says in an almost imploring tone. "Jonadab's descendants have obeyed his command not to drink wine, and to this very day none of them drink any. But I have kept on speaking to you, and you have not obeyed Me. I have continued to send you all My servants and prophets, and they have told you to give up your evil ways and to do what is right. But you would not listen to Me or pay attention to Me. Jonadab's descendants have obeyed what their ancestor gave them, but you people have not obeyed Me...."[50]

And again, after another bout of inflictions has failed to have any lasting effect: "In spite of everything that has happened, they have not returned to Me, the Lord, their God....,"[51]

And yet again, "I have wiped out whole nations; I have destroyed their cities and left their walls and towers in ruins. The cities are deserted; the streets are empty – no one is left. I thought that then My people would have reverence for Me and accept My discipline, that they would never forget the lesson I taught them. But soon they were behaving as badly as ever...."[52]

And yet, All-powerful He remains!

That is His real mystery!

Throughout, and till the very end of the Old Testament, God is wailing and raving at the infidelity of the people He has chosen as His own, He is forever and till the very end moaning about His not having been able to persuade or beat them into venerating Him and Him alone.

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[50] *Jeremiah*, 35.12-17. [51] *Hosea*, 7.10. [52] *Zephaniah*, 3.6-7.

The Church puts a gloss on this, a gloss that, to pluck Macaulay's phrase for our scriptures, "would move laughter in girls at a (Vedantic!) Boarding House"! In *Dei Verbum*, Vatican-II explained the *leitmotif* of the Old Testament as follows:

> In carefully planning and preparing the salvation of the whole human race the God of infinite love, by a special dispensation, chose for Himself a people to whom He would entrust His promises. First He entered into a covenant with Abraham (see *Gen*. 15:18) and, through Moses, with the people of Israel (see *Ex*. 24:8). To this people which He had acquired for Himself, He so manifested Himself through words and deeds as the one true and living God that Israel came to know by experience the ways of God with men. Then, too, when God Himself spoke to them through the mouth of the prophets, Israel daily gained deeper and clearer understanding of His ways and made them more widely known among the nations (see *Ps*. 21:29; 95:1-3; *Is*. 2:1-4; *Jer*. 3:17). The plan of salvation foretold by the sacred authors, recounted and explained by them, is found as the true Word of God in the books of the Old Testament: these books, therefore, written under divine inspiration, preserve a lasting value: for whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope (*Rom*. 15:4).[53]

That is the thread that runs through the Old Testament, according to the Church! That the cruelties of the Old Testament God speak to His "infinite love"! That the cruelties were designed to give His chosen people the opportunity "to know by experience the ways of God"! That as a result of these cruelties the chosen people actually "gained deeper and clearer understanding of His ways"! That the whole arrangement, and the successive bouts of crushing cruelty suffuse us with hope!

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[53] *Dei verbum, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, 18 November, 1965, 14.

And there is a purpose to these round about methods of education! That purpose is explained by the Church as follows:

> The principal purpose to which the plan of the old covenant was directed was to prepare for the coming of Christ, the redeemer of all and of the messianic kingdom, to announce this coming by prophecy (see *Luke* 24:44; *John* 5:39; *1 Peter* 1:10), and to indicate its meaning through various types.... God, the inspirer and author of both Testaments, wisely arranged that the New Testament be hidden in the Old and that the Old be made manifest in the New. For, though Christ established the new covenant with His blood (see *Luke* 22:20; *1 Cor.* 11:25), still the books of the Old Testament with all their parts, caught up into the meaning of the proclamation of the Gospel, acquire and show forth their full meaning in the New Testament (see *Matt.* 5:17; *Luke* 24:27; *Rom.* 16:25-26; *2 Cor.* 3:14-16) and in turn shed light on it and explain it.[54]

On the other hand, the principal purpose of the Bible, says Allah in the Quran, was to forecast the coming of the final Prophet, Ahmed-that-is-Muhammad!

Which of these rival, mutually contradictory claims should we believe?

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[54] *Ibid.*, 15, 16.

The Almighty displaced

24

The ascent of Jesus

All His devices having failed to get the people to worship Him and Him alone, God contrives a peculiar stratagem.

He sends down His only Son.

To suffer and be killed.

And to thereby redeem the world – that is, all who are living at that time as well as all who are to come later – of sin, of the sin, that is, of not worshipping Him as the one and only God.

That this is a stratagem is made absolutely and repeatedly clear in the New Testament. This is stated directly on several occasions. And many features of the accounts testify to the same effect. Events that transpire – and of which the Gospels are said to be a record – are said to proceed strictly along the course that has been ordained by Him. Jesus is fully aware that he is an instrument for God's plan. He says so again and again, indeed his anxiety always is that everyone should see, and acknowledge him as such. He repeatedly forecasts his rejection by the people, his betrayal, his death, his resurrection. At every turn he takes one course rather than another even though he knows that it will invite hardship, suffering, and eventually death, because, he says, and so do the compilers of the Gospels, doing so alone would fulfill what has been written in the scriptures.

What is cited from the scriptures as the forecast which has to be fulfilled is a sentence here, a few words there. In the original scriptures themselves – the books of the Old Testament which we have been going through – that sentence or those few words have not been lit up in any way.

Nor do the stray words and sentences string into any pattern. A thousand other words or sentences could as well have been chosen for being fulfilled. Had they been selected, the pattern of Jesus' life could have been very different.

In any event, the expectation which forms the *leitmotif* of the Old Testament is the belief that the Lord God expresses repeatedly – that the people *will* one day come to worship Him and Him alone. As we have seen, this is the one, singular, exclusive, overriding aim of God. It is the one forecast He lets out again and again. It is the one consummation He longs for.

Yet that central object, that most prominent of forecasts is not the one which is chosen for being fulfilled during the events which the New Testament records. Instead, a sentence from this Book, a few words from another one – including, as we have seen, a mis-translated word: "virgin" for "young woman" – are chosen for fulfillment. One is left to wonder: which is the cause, which the effect? Is it that those sentences having been written in the Books of the Old Testament, Jesus' life proceeded along one course? Or is it that Jesus' life having proceeded along one trajectory, rather that the compilers having made it proceed along one trajectory in their narratives, they read a special significance into those particular words and sentences?

In any event, the instrument God has chosen is thoroughly convinced that he is an instrument, that the privations he is to undergo, including and specially the cruel and unjust death which is to be visited upon him, are essential to God's plan, that it is through these privations being visited upon him, that through them alone will the people come to believe that they must worship God and Him alone. Moreover, like God, Jesus is convinced that the suffering and death that he shall undergo *will* succeed in turning the people to God. Jesus is certain – no doubt on the authority and say-so of God – that the people *will* come to worship God and God alone, that

they will come to do so soon, that the Kingdom of God will break out within the lifetime of those who are seeing and hearing him. Were he a member of Stalin's CPSU or Mao's CCP, it would certainly be said that Jesus was not just an instrument in their plan, but that he was a thoroughly brainwashed instrument.

Being All-powerful, being the Almighty, God could have even now chosen the direct route: He could have instilled the requisite faith in people directly, immediately. But, as is His wont, He once again chooses an Adam Smithian round-about method of attaining His objective. He is being consistent in one sense, and innovative in another. As has been His practice throughout the Old Testament, He chooses to bring the people round by inflicting suffering. The innovation is that this time round, instead of subjecting to pain the people whose homage He is panting for, God makes His own Son suffer. Indirection squared.

By witnessing the humiliation and cruelties to which the Son is subjected, by coming to realize that they have themselves had a hand in inflicting those cruelties, the people, God reckons, will at last acquire faith in Him, the Father.

That to get them to worship Him, He is subjecting His own Son to cruelty and death is projected as proof-positive of His being full of compassion! Indeed, of compassion twice-over. First, instead of subjecting the target people to suffering, He is confining the suffering to His Son. Second, the fact that He is subjecting His own Son to such extreme cruelty just to redeem the people of their sin – the sin, that is, of not worshipping Him – proves how much He feels for the unredeemed wretches.

As we know from what has happened since, like all the devices that God had deployed earlier, this one too has proved just as ineffectual: many times more do *not* worship that one God today than was the case at the time He put His

Son through cruelty and death. The Kingdom of God which was to break out within the lifetimes of those around Jesus seems even farther away.

But the device – of sending the Son – *has* had far-reaching consequences of another kind.

In the New Testament, in contrast to the Old, God recedes into the background. Almost all talk is now of the Son.

Second, the Son is progressively identified with God. Initially, the assertion is that only through Jesus can one reach God, only through Jesus can one obtain God's benediction. Soon, as we shall see, the claim becomes that to worship Jesus is to worship God.

Next, those who propagate Jesus' name, his message, in particular the Church, are super-imposed on Jesus, soon they are identified with him: those who honour the missionary, the Church, the thesis now runs, honour Jesus; those who dishonour the former, dishonour Jesus.

And thereby God.

And are therefore consigned to eternal damnation.

Just as Jesus' sonship is assured by having God proclaim it, the Church's exaltation is ensured by having Jesus proclaim it.

God

Except for having thought up a new device, God in the New Testament remains what He has been in the Old.

He remains the Jealous God. Jesus warns the Pharisees,

> 'He that is not with me is against me; and he that gathereth not with me scattereth abroad.
>
> Wherefore I say unto you, All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men: but the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven unto men.
>
> And whosoever speaketh a word against the Son of Man, it shall be forgiven him: but whosoever speaketh against the Holy Ghost, it

> shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, neither in the world to come.[1]

God's singular concern remains the same – that is, to ensure that He, and He alone is worshipped. "But the hour cometh, and now is," Jesus tells the woman from Samaria, "when the true worshippers shall worship the father in spirit and in truth: *for the Father seeketh such to worship Him.*"[2] The addition that the New Testament entails is that the believer must worship God *via* Jesus alone. Just as God is anxious that everyone recognize that He is the Almighty Lord, Jesus too is anxious that everyone recognize that he alone is the emissary of God, that God is the one who has chosen him and sent him to mankind, that all mankind know that he – Jesus – loves God.

Jesus has a special compassion for Mary Magdalene, the one who anointed him and wiped his feet with her hair. So, when Mary and her sister Martha, rush to tell him that their brother, Lazarus, is mortally sick, Jesus is moved. But he at once sees that there is a purpose to the death and illness. He says, "This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified thereby" – that is, the sickness has been brought about so that he, Jesus, may perform a miracle, that of reviving Lazarus from the dead, thus getting the people to see that he is from God. And so while Jesus knows that Lazarus is dead – he tells the sisters plainly, "Lazarus is dead" – he adds, "I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, to the intent ye may believe; nevertheless let us go to him." Lazarus has been buried for four days. When Jesus reaches the cave in which the grave is,

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[1] *Matthew*, 12.30-32; *Mark*, 3.28-29, to the same effect; see also *Luke*, 11.23. The practice among the other People of the Book, the Muslims of course is quite the opposite! In Islam, as is well known, all are cautioned: *Ba Khuda diwana bash o' ba Muhammad hoshiyar*.

[2] *John*, 4.23.

and asks that the stone be removed, Martha tells him "Lord, by this time he stinketh, for he has been dead four days." Jesus tells her, "Said I not unto thee, that, if thou wouldst believe, thou shouldst see the glory of God?" And he lifts his eyes, and thanks God, "Father I thank thee that thou hast heard me. And I knew that thou hearest me always: *but because of the people which stand by I said it, that they may believe that thou hast sent me.*"[3]

"Let not your hearts be troubled," Jesus tells his followers, "Ye believe in God, believe also in me." "I am the way, the truth, and the life: *no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.* If ye had known me, ye should have known my Father also: and from henceforth ye know Him, and have seen him." A disciple tells Jesus, show us the Father, and that will suffice. "Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known me, Philip?," Jesus asks. *"He that hath seen me hath seen the Father:* and how sayest thou then, Shew us the Father?" *"Believest thou not that I am in the Father, and the Father in me? The words that I speak unto you I speak not of myself: but the Father that dwelleth in me, he doeth the works." "Believe me,"* Jesus exhorts his followers, *"that I am in the Father, and the Father in me: or else believe me for the very works' sake."*[4]

As the final days approach, Jesus tells the companions what is going to transpire, and explains, "And now I have told you before it come to pass, *that, when it come to pass, ye might believe.* Hereafter I will not talk much with you: for the prince of this world cometh, and hath nothing in me. *But that the world may know that I love the Father;* and as the Father gave me commandment, even so I do. Arise, let us go hence...."[5]

"Father, the hour is come," Jesus says, lifting his eyes to heaven, "Glorify thy Son, that the Son may also glorify thee....

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[3]*John,* 11.4, 14-15, 17, 39-42.
[4]*John,* 14. 6-11.
[5]*John,* 14.29-31.

And this life is eternal, *that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent....*"[6] Jesus tells God who he is praying for – something to which we shall turn in a moment – and explains the purpose of his doing so: "That they all may be one," he says, "as thou, Father art in me, and I in thee, that they also be one in us: *that the world may believe that thou hast sent me....* I in them, and thou in me, that they may be perfect in one; *and that the world may know that thou hast sent me,* and hast loved them, as thou hast loved me...."[7]

This addition apart, things remain the same. God remains All-powerful. Nothing happens without His command – even a sparrow does not fall to the ground but for His having decreed that it should.[8] God remains the All-knowing: in the New Testament too He continues to "seeth in secret"[9], here also He continues to "knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask Him."[10]

And He continues in His old ways. God continues to inflict punishments on one generation for sins – the usual sins of not worshipping Him, of not honouring His emissaries – that their ancestors have committed: recall God's admonishment of the teachers of law – your ancestors killed prophets, and you build tombs for them; that shows that you approve of what they did, God tells them; "So the people of this time shall be punished for the murder of all the prophets killed since the creation of the world," God proclaims, "....Yes, I tell you, the people of this time shall be punished for them all."[11]

He continues to inflict suffering so that His emissary may relieve it, and thereby the people may worship Him. He makes a man blind so that a miracle may be performed, and the people impressed. Jesus is walking. He sees a man who has been blind since birth. His disciples ask him whether this

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[6]*John,* 17.1-3.
[7]*John,* 17.21, 23.
[8]*Matthew,* 10.29.
[9]For example, *Matthew,* 6.18.
[10]For example, *Matthew,* 6.8.
[11]*Luke,* 11.47-51.

man had sinned or his parents had that he has been punished with blindness. Jesus answers, "Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents; *but that the works of God should be made manifest in him.*"[12] And he proceeds to spit on the ground, mix the spit in clay, and anoint the eyes of the man with the clay. The man goes and washes his eyes as Jesus has asked him to do, and is cured of blindness....[13] Similarly, as we have seen, God has Lazarus fall sick and die, so that His Son may raise him, and thereby turn the people to Him.[14]

He certainly continues to be different from what He demands that people be! We must love even those who hate us, Jesus instructs mankind. What is virtuous in loving those who love us?, he asks. "For if ye love them which love thee, what reward have ye?," Jesus instructs in a ringing passage. "Do not even the publicans the same?" "And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? Do not even the publicans so? Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect."[15] But what does God do? Is *He* perfect by Jesus' standard?

God's conduct is certainly conditional. Recall the words in which Jesus exhorts mankind to forgive others: "For *if ye forgive men their trespasses,* your heavenly Father will also forgive you: *But if ye forgive not men their trespasses,* neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." And His mercy is strictly circumscribed! *"And His mercy is on them that fear Him from generation to generation."*[16] Not Jesus' standard, certainly!

Jesus describes Him in the well-known, glowing words,

> And I say unto you, Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you.
> For everyone that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.

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[12] *John,* 9.1-3.

[13] The Sadducees and Pharisees continue to doubt the miracle, and so, the Gospel instructs us, their sin continues: *John,* 9.40-41.

[14] *John,* 11.4, 42. [15] *Matthew,* 5.46-48. [16] *Luke,* 1.50.

> If a son shall ask bread of any of you that is a father, will he give him a stone? Or if he ask a fish, will he for a fish give him a serpent?
> Or if he shall ask an egg, will he offer him a scorpion?
> If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children: how much more shall your heavenly father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him?[17]

Does the description fit God in the slightest?!

Yet you must hail Him as being Merciful, as being suffused with "tender mercy" – as the Virgin Mary does in her song of gratitude[18], as Zachariah does while delivering his prophecy about Jesus.[19]

God remains All-knowing and Mercy itself – yet our suffering continues as before. He remains All-powerful – and as ineffective as before. Jerusalem continues unreconstructed. In the Old Testament, God was forever proclaiming His love for Jerusalem, in the New Testament we have Jesus crying out his love for the place, and also affirming what we heard so often from God – that while He was yearning to help Jerusalem, the city would not let Him do so. The Pharisees warn Jesus to leave town immediately as Herod is out to kill him – a bit of a change there: for, as we have seen, at almost every other turn, the Gospels make out that the Pharisees in particular and the Jews in general are the ones who are out to kill Jesus. Jesus tells them that he has to work miracles for the next two days, and that it is on the third day that he shall be "perfected". Yet, he says, he must walk for the three days as a prophet cannot perish except in Jerusalem. And he laments, as God has before him,

> Jerusalem, Jerusalem! You kill the prophets, you stone the messengers God has sent you! How many times have I wanted to put my arms round all your people, just as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, *but you would not let me*. And so your Temple will be

[17] *Luke*, 11.9-13. [18] *Luke*, 1.46-55. [19] *Luke*, 1.67-79.

> abandoned. I assure you that you will not see me until the time comes when you say, 'God bless him who comes in the name of the Lord.'[20]

And, as we know, to the end Jerusalem and its people continue unredeemed: if the Gospels are to be believed, they are the ones, and not Pilate, who kill Jesus, the Son God has sent down.

As ineffectual

Moreover, God continues to remain as ineffectual in the Gospels as He has been in the Old Testament. After all, the central feature of the Gospels is the decision of God to send His one and only Son to redeem the world, to wash it of its sins. How often this is stressed, how often Jesus himself is made to affirm this!

Even as the angel informs Joseph that his virgin wife is pregnant, he tells him that the name of the child shall be Jesus, "for he shall save his people from their sins."[21]

In the course of instructing his disciples, Jesus himself tells them, "And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant: Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life as a ransom for many."[22] At the final supper, Jesus takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to the disciples, and says, "Take, eat: this is my body." Next he takes the cup and passes it round. All drink from it, Jesus tells them, "This is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many."[23]

In John, of course, this is one of the threads that runs through the entire Gospel. Explaining the very purpose of God in sending His Son down, John says, "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him, should not perish, but have

[20]*Luke*, 13.31-35.
[21]*Matthew*, 1.21.
[22]*Matthew*, 20.27-28; *Mark*, 10.44-45 similar.
[23]*Mark*, 14.22-24.

everlasting life."[24] "I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, *which I will give for the life of the world.*"[25] "I am the good shepherd," Jesus explains, "and know my sheep, and am known of mine. As the Father knoweth me, even so I know the Father: *and I lay down my life for the sheep.*"[26] "The hour is come that the Son of man should be glorified," Jesus tells his disciples as the multitude presses to see him. 'Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit...."[27] And so on.

In a word, God sent His one and only Son to suffer so that humanity may be redeemed of its sins. Either in the sense that it begins to sin less, or in the sense that it has been washed of its sins, that it has been pardoned for what it has been doing. God's stratagem has most certainly failed to reduce the quantum of sinning. As for Jesus' death washing our sins, even after two thousand years' efforts to explain how this is possible the Church has not been able to carry conviction.

Jesus ascends

On occasion, the Gospels have Jesus proclaim that he is subordinate to God: "Ye have heard how I said unto you," Jesus tells his disciples as they are distressed at his imminent departure, "I go away, and come again unto you. If ye loved me, ye would rejoice, because I said, I go unto the Father: *for my Father is greater than I.*"[28]

But such subordination is the exception. Step by step, Jesus is placed at par with, and eventually identified with God. This has an immediate, ineluctable consequence: as Jesus is one with God, you can't believe in God and not believe in Jesus. But first the steps.

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[24] *John*, 3.16.
[25] *John*, 6.51.
[26] *John*, 10.14-15.
[27] *John*, 12.23-24.
[28] *John*, 14.28.

The ascent begins in the synoptic Gospels themselves, it reaches its apogee in John.

As a first step, of course, the Gospels instruct us that Jesus has been sent by God, and that what he says and does is to be reverenced as it is strictly in accordance with God's plan, His specific instruction and inspiration.

Jesus has performed another of his miracles. He has done so on a Sabbath. The Jewish priests are therefore triply incensed: because of the miracles Jesus is continuing to perform, their followers are flocking to Jesus; in this instance, he has broken one of their rules – of no work being done on a Sabbath, this way the people will become disregardful of all rules, they feel, and that will cripple their power; and on top of it all, Jesus is committing blasphemy upon blasphemy by putting himself at par with God. They seek to slay him. Jesus explains to them:

> Verily, verily, I say unto you, the Son can do nothing of himself, but what he seeth the Father do: for what things soever He doeth, these also doeth the Son likewise.[29]

Notice the extent of identification even here: Jesus isn't just saying that whatever he is doing is what God has asked him to do; he is saying that what he has seen God do, he too is doing. At one level, it means that he has seen God do good on a Sabbath, and so he is curing people too on a Sabbath. At another, that he too has the authority and capacity to do what God does. Jesus continues:

> For the Father loveth the Son, and sheweth him all things that Himself doeth: and He will shew him greater works than these, that ye may marvel.
> For as the Father raiseth up the dead, and quickeneth them; even so the Son quickeneth whom he will.[30]

But even that much would mean only that God had made

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[29]*John*, 5.19. [30]*John*, 5.20-21.

Jesus capable of doing all which God Himself does. People could therefore approach God or Jesus. The words that follow foreclose the former route. Little use in approaching God directly, we are told, as God has delegated His power and function entirely to Jesus! John has Jesus proclaim,

For the Father judgeth no man, but hath committed all judgment unto the Son.

And He has done this for a specific purpose:

> .... but hath committed all judgment unto the Son that *all men should honour the Son, even as they honour the Father. He that honoureth not the Son honoureth not the Father which hath sent him....*
>
> For as the Father has life in Himself: so hath He given to the Son to have life in himself;
>
> And hath given him authority to execute judgment also, because he is the Son of man.[31]

Jesus has pardoned the sinful woman of her sins. The Pharisees are arguing with him. "Ye judge after the flesh," he tells them, "I judge no man. And yet if I judge, my judgment is true: for I am not alone, but I and the Father that sent me." That distinction – between him and the one who has sent him – lasts but a moment. Jesus explains to the Pharisees, "Ye are from beneath: I am from above; ye are of this world: I am not of this world. I said therefore unto you that ye shall die in your sins: for if ye believe not that *I am He,* ye shall die in your sins."[32]

As Jesus proceeds, there is the same mixture: he is claiming merely to be doing what God has taught and instructed him to do, and simultaneously that he is indistinguishable from God:

> When ye have lifted up the Son of man, then shall ye know that *I am He,* and that I do nothing of myself; but as my Father hath taught me, I speak these things.

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[31] *John,* 5.22-23, 26-27. [32] John, 8.23-24.

> And He that sent me is with me: the Father hath not left me alone; for I do always those things that please Him.[33]

Jesus has reached Jerusalem for the final moment. The people are out in the lanes to greet him. The Pharisees are incensed: "Perceive ye how ye prevail nothing?," they warn each other, "Behold, the world is gone after him." Jesus' soul is troubled. "Father, save me from this hour," he exclaims, "But for this cause came I unto this hour." "Father, glorify thy name," Jesus exhorts God. And God answers, with the unabashed directness and confidence that befits Him, "I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again" – as we would expect from His unvarying record, glorifying His name remains His overriding concern.[34]

The people hear the Voice, some say it is thunder, it is an angel say others. "This voice came not because of me," Jesus tells them, "but for your sakes" – that is, not because Jesus needed to be convinced but so that the people may have faith.[35]

The exchanges continue, many still do not believe, at the least they do not own up to their belief – "For they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God," John tells us.[36] Jesus cries out – words that reinforce the identification – *"He that believeth on me, believeth not on me, but on Him that sent me. And he that seeth me seeth Him that sent me."*[37] Jesus continues to explain the purpose of his having been sent, and emphasizes again that what he is saying and doing is not of his own volition but in accordance with the commandment of God.[38]

We see already several strands of claims being interwoven: that whatever Jesus is saying and doing is at the behest of God; next the claim that God has given him powers to do what God does; the further claim that some functions –

[33]*John*, 8.28-29.
[34]*John*, 12.19, 27-28.
[35]*John*, 12.29-30.
[36]*John*, 12.43.
[37]*John*, 12.44-45.
[38]*John*, 12.49-50.

in particular, the all-important function of judging men – have been completely delegated by God to Jesus; the claim that Jesus is a stand-in for God: that those who see him, see God, that those who honour him, honour God.

But those are just incidental to the main claim of which we have already seen glimpses: *"I am He."* John asserts this identity repeatedly, and in several ways. The very opening of the Gospel instructs us, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." What happened as far as we earthlings are concerned? John answers: *"And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth."*[39] So, like God, Jesus has existed from before creation.[40] Soon Jesus himself reiterates the identity – that he is the pre-existent Word. He has pardoned the woman accused of adultery. An argument is going on between him and the Jews, in particular the Pharisees and scribes. "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day," Jesus tells them, "and he saw it and was glad." The Jews retort, "You are not yet fifty years old, and hast thou seen Abraham?" "Verily, verily, I say unto you," Jesus tells them, asserting the identity which in their eyes is blasphemy, *"Before Abraham was, I am."* The Jews take up stones to hurl at him....[41]

Another miracle, another set of exchanges. Jesus has been forecasting his imminent death. Lest that lead people to wonder how the one whom God Himself has sent can be killed by mere mortals, and lest this lead them to doubt his origin, Jesus explains that he has been sent precisely to lay down his life for his sheep, that because he lays down his life for them God loves him, that he is going to sacrifice his life so

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[39] *John*, 1.1, 14.

[40] There was a similar progression in Islam. *Nur-i-Muhammad* came to be regarded as having existed before Allah could create the universe, and be known as the Creator.

[41] *John*, 8.56-59.

that he might live again, that "No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This commandment I have received from my Father." Some believe him, some say he has the devil in him, others that he is mad. Jesus is now in Jerusalem. The arguments are continuing. Jesus tells the assembled Jews how they do not believe him because they are not his sheep, that his own sheep hear his voice and believe him, that he in turn gives them eternal life, that they shall never perish, that no man shall pluck them from his hand. For they were given him by the Father, and no man is greater than that Father. *"I and my Father are one,"* Jesus tells them to seal the matter. The Jews take stones to again stone him.... But I have done many good works, Jesus remonstrates with the Jews. We do not stone you for those works, they say, but for the blasphemy, because, though you are a man, you make yourself out to be God. Jesus presents contrary arguments, and exclaims, "If I do not the works of my Father, believe me not. But if I do, though ye believe not me, believe the works: that ye may know, and believe [the same anxiety as that of God!] that *the Father is in me, and I in Him*."[42]

Soon Jesus and his disciples are at the Last Supper. To drill into them the manner in which they must care for each other – for there have been the usual rivalries among them also – Jesus washes the feet of his disciples. He tells them, *"Ye call me Master and Lord: and ye say well; for so I am*. If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you...."[43]

Jesus tells them how one of them is about to betray him. And he says he is doing so for a purpose: "Now I tell you before it come, that, when it is come to pass, ye may believe that *I am He*."[44]

The hour has come. Jesus is commending his disciples to

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[42] *John*, 10.1-38.
[43] *John*, 13.12-15.
[44] *John*, 13.18-19.

God, he is praying for them, and for those who will believe in him because of what these disciples will preach to them. "That they all may be one....," Jesus prays. "And the glory which thou gavest me I have given them," Jesus assures God, "that they may be one *even as we are one*."[45]

It requires little imagination to see that this ever higher ascent causes several problems. Consider an elemental one: after all, others have their own "matters of faith." How are these assertions, this progressive identification of Jesus with God, these notions – of Jesus having pre-existed in heaven, of his being the Son of God – to be held in the face of contrary notions that another faith regards as equally central? We need go no further than the sister faith – Islam – which in a sense builds on the Old Testament.

As much a "matter of faith"

"O ye people of the Book," Allah warns in the Quran, "overstep not bounds in your religion: and of God speak only truth. The Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, *is only an apostle of God*, and His word which He conveyed into Mary, and a Spirit proceeding from Himself...."[46]

"*In blasphemy indeed are they*," Allah declares, "who say 'Verily God is the Messiah Ibn Maryam [son of Mary],' Say: 'Who then hath the least power against God, if He chose to destroy the Messiah Ibn Maryam, and his mother, and all who are on the earth together?'"[47]

"*They do blaspheme*," Allah proclaims again, "who say 'God is the Messiah, son of Mary....'"[48]

"The Messiah, son of Mary," Allah says conclusively, "is *but an apostle*; other apostles have flourished before him; and his mother was just a person; they both ate food." "Behold!", Allah tells the faithful, "how we make clear to

[45] *John*, 17.22.
[46] *Quran*, 4.171.
[47] *Quran*, 5.19.
[48] *Quran*, 5.75.

them the signs! Then behold how they [the unbelieving Christians, that is] turn aside."[49]

Thus Allah warns Jews and Christians, "O people of the Book! Outstep not the bounds of truth in your religion...."[50]

"The Jews say, 'Ezra [Ozair] is a son of God,'" Allah recounts, "And the Christians say, 'The Messiah is a son of God.'" "Such the sayings in their mouth!," Allah scoffs. "They resemble the sayings of the infidels of old! God do battle with them! How they are deluded away from Truth."[51]

"They take their teachers, and their monks and the Messiah, son of Mary, for Lords in derogation of God, though bidden to worship one God only," He says. "Fain would they put out God's light with their mouths...." He shall halt them in their tracks, Allah warns: "But Allah will not allow but that His Light should be perfected, even though the unbelievers may detest (it)."[52]

Now, the belief that Jesus is the Son of God, indeed the progressive identification of Jesus with God and his Word, is a central feature of Christian faith. On the other hand, that these notions constitute nothing short of blasphemy, a crime for which the punishment prescribed is death, is just as central to the faith of a Muslim. Hence the problem. We have seen that every single feature on the basis of which Jesus is held to be special, on which the Bible is said to be special is a matter of faith, it has to be taken on faith. But those very features condemn the belief to be blasphemy.

And, as we have seen, there is a reason why the Christians' belief is sinful, Allah states: "It beseemth not God to beget a son," He says.[53]

"Jesus is no more than a servant whom We favoured," Allah says, "and proposed as an instance of divine power to the children of Israel...."[54]

Worse still, it is central to a Muslim's faith that what the

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[49] *Quran*, 5.78. [50] *Quran*, 5.80. [51] *Quran*, 9.30.
[52] *Quran*, 9.31-32. [53] *Quran*, 19.35. [54] *Quran*, 43.59.

Christian regards as being the mission for which God sent His Son – Jesus – down to earth, and for which He had him suffer so much, that mission itself is a deliberate invention. In the Quran, in the eyes of Islam, the function of Jesus is not to deliver the conclusive message of God. He is pictured as just a latter-day John. That is, his function is merely to forecast the future coming of Prophet Mohammed. The Christians deliberately suppressed this forecast of Jesus – says, not just the average Muslim, but Allah Himself. For in the Quran, Allah reminds us, "And remember, Jesus, the son of Mary, said : 'O, children of Israel! I am the messenger of Allah (sent) to you, confirming the Law (which came) before me, and giving glad tidings of a Messenger to come after me, whose name shall be Ahmed.'" Even at that time these persons who had turned their back on God, disbelieved Me, Allah says: "But when he came to them with clear signs, they said, 'This is evident sorcery.'" "Who does greater wrong than the one who invents falsehood against Allah," Allah asks in exasperation, "even as he is being invited to Islam?"[55]

It is precisely because this forecast is missing from the New Testament, it is precisely because the Christians have replaced altogether the purpose for which Jesus was sent by a so-called mission which is nothing but their own invention, that Allah charges them, that to this day Islam charges them with having doctored and distorted the divine scripture.

Is the central mission as presented in the New Testament itself a falsification? Obviously not, say the Christians. Obviously, say the Muslims. Either way, entirely a "matter of faith."

Allah's charge in the Quran goes further, much further. As Jesus is but the son of Mary, as he is just an apostle like so many others, the notion of the Trinity – a notion that puts Jesus and the Holy Ghost at par with God – is nothing in Allah's reckoning but blasphemy.

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[55]*Quran*, 61.6-7.

"Believe therefore in God and his apostles," says Allah, "and say not 'Three' [that there is a Trinity]: Desist: it will be better for you: For Allah is One God: Glory be to Him: (Far exalted is He) above having a son...."[56]

"They surely are Infidels, who say, 'God is the third of three,'" Allah proclaims. "For there is no God but one God; and if they refrain not from what they say," He warns, "grievous chastisement shall light on such of them as are Infidels."[57]

"These!", Allah warns, "they are veritable infidels! And for the infidels have We prepared a shameful punishment." "And those who believe in God and his apostles, and make no difference between them – these! We will bestow on them their reward at last...."[58]

In a word, the very belief which in a sense makes a Christian a Christian makes him, in the eyes of the Islamic Allah, an infidel, it makes him one out to blaspheme Allah and His Prophet.

The next step cuts even deeper. Jesus as the Son of God is out, the Trinity is out, but so is the very event which is the heart of Christianity – the crucifixion.

"Yet", says Allah, "they [the Jews] slew him [Jesus] not and they crucified him not, but they had only his likeness..."[59]

Nor are these affirmations in the Quran accidental. They are central to the mission of the Prophet. For the dogma of Islam is that Allah has sent many an apostle, among them Moses and Jesus, but that the followers of these prophets falsified their scriptures, and so He sent Mohammed, the final one, the seal of prophets, to bring all humanity, including those who for the time being have been misled into being Christians and Jews, back to the true path.

"Among the Jews," Allah tells us, "are those who displace the words of their scriptures, and say.... perplexing with their

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[56]*Quran*, 4.171.
[57]*Quran*, 5.76.
[58]*Quran*, 4.140, 151.
[59]*Quran*, 4.157.

tongues, and wounding the faith by their revilings...."[60] "O people of the Scriptures!," Allah announces, "Now is our Apostle come to you to clear up to you much that ye concealed of those Scriptures, and to pass over many things...."[61]

Had God sent Jesus to hail the coming of the new Prophet, Ahmed, or had He sent him to court death on the Cross and thereby redeem us of our sins? Each proposition is as unprovable as the other, each is as much "a matter of faith" as its opposite.

The matter is put beyond doubt by *hadis*. Thus we have the Prophet reporting that Allah had told him that those who maintain that He had a son abuse Him. The Prophet put the matter across in very stern words indeed: the *hadis* records,

> Narrated Ibn Abbas: "The Prophet said, 'Allah said, "The son of Adam *tells a lie against Me* though he has no right to do so, and *he abuses Me* though he has no right to do so. As for his telling a lie against Me, it is that he claims that I cannot recreate him as I created him before; and as for his abusing Me, it is his statement that I have offspring."'"[62]

The Prophet also maintained that Jesus would return, that he would marry and have children, that he would rule, that he would break crosses and kill swine, that he would lead Muslims in prayer to Allah, that he would remain for 45 years, after which he would die and be buried along with the Prophet in the latter's grave.[63] Each proposition no less verifiable than propositions about Jesus' resurrection, his living presence in his new body, the Church....

In a word, on event after event, on feature after feature, indeed on every event, every feature which makes Jesus special, scholars have to acknowledge that it is "a matter of faith." And this acknowledgment itself brings the

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[60] *Quran*, 4.46. [61] *Quran*, 5.16.
[62] *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Book 60, Chapter 10, *hadis* 9.
[63] c.f., *Mishkat al-Masabih*, Book 26, Chapter 6.

propositions and narratives into direct confrontation with matters which are as central to the faith of other religions, in particular the sister religion, Islam.

But to proceed with our account.

As the needs of the Church intensify, the Son becomes the Father Himself....

And from an earlier and earlier stage. The Old Testament has used the appellation Son of Man, prophets in it have forecast the coming of the Son of Man. Accordingly, in the Gospels Jesus is said to speak of himself as the Son of Man. As the needs of the new religion and of the Church demand a thicker and thicker halo, the appellation becomes both – more exalted, and as being applicable to an earlier and earlier stage in Jesus' existence. *The Oxford Companion* traces the course: at first the titles – Son of Man, Son of God – are applied to "the post-Easter phase of Jesus' saving activity"; soon, they are applied to his earthly life; soon, the Son of God is used from the moment of Jesus' birth, soon to the moment of his being conceived.... The identification proceeds – soon enough, as we have seen, the distinction between the Father and the Son vanishes! Along two strands. At first there are God and His "Word" on the one hand, and Jesus – at a discernible distance. Initially, *The Oxford Companion* recounts, Jesus appears as a sage or wise man who uses expressions and forms of speech from the Wisdom literature. Soon he is projected as the final envoy of Wisdom. And soon his person becomes identical with Wisdom. Similarly, at first Jesus' exalted status commences from his birth. Soon Jesus is claimed to have existed in heaven before his birth: the emphasis now shifts to the Father having *sent* His Son – an expression that naturally must be taken to imply that the Son existed alongside his Father before being sent down *via* Mary. Expressions which had been used functionally to denote a historical mission, says *The Oxford Companion,* now acquire "a metaphysical sense". And soon,

the culmination: Jesus begins being called God – specially, as we have seen, in the Gospel of John.[64]

But Jesus is not the only one who ascends, and nudges the Almighty aside.

[64]For the foregoing, *The Oxford Companion to the Bible,* Bruce M. Metzger, Michael D. Coogan, editors, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1993, pp. 361-63.

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The ascent of the Church

To begin with, as we saw, the Article of Faith was: believe in the one Lord God that the Bible specifies. Next, as that God sent His only Son down, as that Son is in fact the same as God, the Article of Faith became: believe in that one Son – in his miracles, in stories about him contained in the Gospels. Soon this Article too was made more specific.

John instructs in effect that God is known to us only as a word, only on the say-so of others, the only one we know for a fact and have seen is Jesus: "No man hath seen God at any time," the Gospel proclaims, "the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared Him."[1] Therefore, only to the extent that we can trust Jesus can we take God to be a fact: to believe in God you must first believe in Jesus.

The belief in Jesus is not only necessary, it is sufficient. For the Gospels have Jesus himself aver, "He that believeth on me, believeth not on me, but on Him that sent me. And he that seeth me seeth Him that sent me."[2]

Jesus has been telling his disciples of the final events that are about to commence, and which shall result in his being taken away from them. They are troubled. "Let not your heart be troubled," Jesus assures them. "Ye believe in God, believe also in me." He continues, *"I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me."* What scope does that leave for recognizing that other paths to God too as valid?

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[1]*John*, 1.18. [2]*John*, 12.44-45.

And Jesus points again to the sufficiency of having known him and having faith in him: "If ye had known me, ye should have known my Father also: and from henceforth ye know Him, and have seen Him." Just show us the Father, the disciple says, that will be enough for us. Jesus presses the identity, "Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known me, Philip? *He that hath seen me hath seen the Father;* and how sayest thou then, Shew us the Father?...."[3]

By now, therefore, the steps are: you must believe that God sent His Son, Jesus; Jesus is indistinguishable from God as he is God Himself; no one knows God, no one has seen Him except Jesus; Jesus is not just a way to God, he is the only way to Him.

This progressive exaltation is next extended to those who, after Jesus, show mankind that one exclusive way. "He that receiveth you, receiveth me," Jesus is said to have told the disciples he is said to have charged with the task of spreading his message, "and he that receiveth me receiveth Him that sent me."[4] Jesus gives his twelve disciples "power and authority over all devils, and to cure diseases." He asks them to journey forth and preach the Kingdom of God. Have faith, take nothing for your journey; he says. "And whatsoever house ye enter into, there abide, and thence depart," Jesus tells them. *"And whosoever shall not receive you, when ye go out of that city, shake off the very dust from your feet for a testimony against them."*[5]

Soon, Jesus is spelling out more vividly the consequences for those who demur at the message the missionaries bring. "And into whatsoever city ye enter, and they receive you, eat such things as are set before you: And heal the sick that are therein, and say unto them, The Kingdom of God is come nigh unto you. But into whatsoever city ye enter, and they receive you not, go your way out into the streets of the same

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[3]*John*, 14.1, 4-11. [4]*Matthew*, 10.40. [5]*Luke*, 9.4-5.

and say, *Even the very dust of your city, which cleaveth on us, we do wipe off against you:* notwithstanding be ye sure of this, that the Kingdom of God is come nigh unto you. *But I say unto you, that it shall be more tolerable in that day for Sodom, than for that city. Woe unto thee, Chorazin! woe unto thee, Bethsaida! for if the mighty works had been done in Tyre and Sidon, which have been done in you, they had a great while ago repented, sitting in sackcloth and ashes. But it shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon at the judgment, than for you. And thou, Capernaum, which art exalted to heaven, shalt be thrust down to hell.*"[6]

Any room left in that for ecumenism? Any more room than in the Old Testament?

And then the identity, not just of Jesus with God, but of the Church and its missionaries with Jesus and there through with God! Jesus is said to have told those who are to carry his message,

> *He that heareth you heareth me; and he that despiseth you despiseth me; and he that despiseth me despiseth Him that sent me.*[7]

In John, as we have seen, the identification is carried farthest. But that Gospel does not neglect to assert the next superimpositions: God-is-Jesus-is-the-Church-cum-missionary. Having once again told the disciples that one of them is going to betray him – "He that eateth bread with me hath lifted up his heel against me" – Jesus affirms, "Now I tell you before it come, that, when, it is come to pass, ye may believe that I am He," and extends the reverence that is due to him to cover the missionary: "....Verily, verily, I say unto you, *he that receiveth whomsoever I send receiveth me;* and he that receiveth me receiveth Him that sent me."[8]

To instill fortitude into his disciples and those who will

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[6]*Luke*, 10.10-15. [7]*Luke*, 10.16. [8]*John*, 13.18-20.

convert others, and to have them continue to repose faith and hope in Jesus, the Gospels have him say,

> But take heed to yourselves: for they shall deliver you up to councils; and in the synagogues ye shall be beaten: and ye shall be brought before rulers and kings for my sake, for a testimony against them.[9]

He exonerates them from every blame even more comprehensively, and enables them to put an even nobler construction on what they do,

> If the world hate you, ye know that it has hated me before it hated you. If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you. Remember the word that I said unto you, the servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you; if they have kept my saying, they will keep yours also. But all these things they will do unto you for my name's sake, because they know not Him that sent me....[10]

They will soon throw you out of the synagogues, the time is coming when those who kill you will feel that they are serving God, Jesus says. "And these things they will do unto you, because they have not known the Father, nor me."[11] Such passages, coming as they do along with those that link God and Jesus and the missionary in the way we have seen, do not merely instill fortitude, they instill self-righteousness: when something he is doing is called in question, the missionary remains unaffected – O, that is how they taunted and persecuted Jesus too; O, they are doing this only because I am working for the cause and name of Jesus; O, they oppose me only because they know neither the Father nor the Son....

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[9] *Mark,* 13.9. [10] *John,* 15.18-21. [11] *John,* 16.1-3.

What aperture is left for tolerating other paths?

It isn't just that there is just one God, and you must believe in Him and Him alone. You must believe in the one version of that one God, the version which is given in the Bible. Second, as He has had only one Son, as that one Son is in fact indistinguishable from God, you must believe in him also. Third, as the Son is the only way to God, unless you embrace that one way you cannot reach God. Indeed, unless you do so, you are guilty of sin in the eyes of the Father, and, therefore, destined to ever-lasting hell.

One consequence, of course, is that, when some other person has another Book, also given by Almighty the Lord God, *precisely because* you do any of these things – *precisely because* you believe in the version of God which is given in the Bible rather than in, say, the Quran; *precisely because* you believe in the Son of God rather than in, say, the final prophet of God, Muhammad; *precisely because* you think that Jesus is the one and only way to God rather than the one indicated in the Quran and exemplified in the *sunnah* of the Prophet – you are guilty of unpardonable sin!

The other consequence is within the tradition: there is no scope for, there *can* be no scope at all for holding other traditions in any regard. Indeed, every teaching that urges some different path is a deliberate conspiracy to lead men into sin. And, must, for that reason, be fought to extinction.

"Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and Him only shalt thou serve," that is the commandment, Jesus tells the Devil as he tries to tempt Jesus.[12]

Jesus tells his missionaries that when they go into a house, "let your peace come upon it." But if the residents are not worthy, if they do not agree to accept the message, that is, "let your peace return to you."[13] Tolerance?

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[12] *Matthew*, 4.10; *Luke*, 4.8.

[13] *Matthew*, 10.13.

"Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men," Jesus declares, "him will I confess my Father which is in heaven. But whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father which is in heaven."[14] Tolerance?

Moreover, when this is the position he takes, how does Jesus measure up on his own criterion? – "For if ye love them which love thee, what reward have ye? Do not even the publicans the same?"

Jesus goes even further in pressing exclusivity. "If any man comes to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple. And whosoever does not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple."[15] And again, "He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me. He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it."[16] And then the Church and the missionaries are slipped in: "He that receiveth you receiveth me, and he that receiveth me receiveth Him that sent me."[17]

"All things are delivered unto me of my Father," Jesus says, "and no man knoweth the Son, but the Father; *neither*

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[14] *Matthew*, 10.32-33; *Luke*, 12.8-9, to the same effect.

[15] *Luke*, 14.26-27.

[16] *Matthew*, 10.37-38. Similar words are ascribed to Jesus in Mark though on a different occasion, and they have a sharper edge to them: both in the rebuke Jesus administers to Peter – "Get thee behind me, Satan: for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but the things that be of men" – as well as in the words he uses for the laity – "Whosoever therefore shall be ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation; of him also shall the Son of man be ashamed, when he cometh in the glory of his Father with the holy angels." *Mark*, 8.33-38; *Luke*, 9.26 to the same effect.

[17] *Matthew*, 10.40. In *Mark*, the purpose is achieved in a slightly different way: "For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake *and the Gospel's*, the same shall save it." *Mark*, 8.35.

knoweth any man the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal Him."[18] As Buddha and Adi Shankracharya were not among those to whom the Son revealed the Father, as Ramakrishna Paramhamsa and Ramana Maharshi are not among them, as the Dalai Lama's creed does not even acknowledge the Father or the Son in those roles, how may the faithful even conceive that these personages may have something of value to teach?

"He that is not with me is against me," Jesus declares much in the fashion of the Father, "and he that gathereth not with me scattereth abroad...."[19]

Do not let anyone call you Master, do not regard anyone else as Master, Jesus tells his disciples and the multitude that has gathered to hear him, for you have but one Master, and that is Christ. Do not look upon anyone as Father, except that one Father in heaven, Jesus tells them.[20]

As the needs of the Church for differentiating its product intensify, Jesus is made to declare that not only is the boon limited to those who believe in the God of the Bible, and in him, it is strictly restricted to those who have been through a particular ritual – but for them who go through that ritual the Kingdom of God is assured! A Pharisee, Nicodemus, is a "ruler of the Jews." We know that you are a teacher who has come from God, he tells Jesus, for no one can do these miracles unless God is with him. 'Verily, verily", Jesus answers, "I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God." That leaves the literal-minded Nicodemus perplexed: "How can a man be born when he is old?," he asks, "Can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born?" "Verily, verily, I say unto thee," Jesus is declared to have said, "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God."[21] The Buddha, Ramakrishna Paramhamsa, Ramana

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[18]*Matthew*, 11.27; *Luke*, 10.22.
[19]*Matthew*, 12.30; *Luke*, 11.23 similar.
[20]*Matthew*, 23.8-10.
[21]*John*, 3.1-5.

Maharshi, Gandhiji – all excluded by that one rule of admission![22]

Jesus proceeds to explain the purpose for which he shall be lifted up, and in doing so also specifies that salvation is strictly limited to those who believe in him, and what he says his mission to earth is about:

> And as Moses lifted up his serpent in the wilderness, even so the Son of man must be lifted up:
> That *whosoever believeth in him* should not perish, but have eternal life.
> For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that *whosoever believeth in him* should not perish, but have ever-lasting life.
> For God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world *through him* might be saved.
> He that believeth on him is not condemned: *but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.*[23]

Ecumenism in the face of such declarations? That salvation is available to "whosoever believeth in him," that it is available only through him, that he who does not believe in Jesus is already condemned....

John has Jesus go further. Jesus assigns a reason on account of which disbelievers do not believe:

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[22]Recall Gandhiji's jest at the Polish Professor of Philosophy: *Gandhiji:* "....I read and get all my inspiration from the Gita. But I also read the Bible and the Koran to enrich my own religion. I incorporate all that is good in other religions." *Krzenski:* "That is your goodwill." *Gandhiji:* "That is not enough." *Krzenski:* "But I have great respect for you." *Gandhiji:* "Not enough. If I were to join the Catholic Church you would have greater respect for me." *Krzenski:* "Oh yes, if you became a Catholic you would be as great as St. Francis." *Gandhiji:* "But not otherwise? A Hindu cannot be a St. Francis? Poor Hindu!" *Krzenski:* "But may I take your photograph?" *Gandhiji:* "No, surely you don't care for materialism! And it is all materialism, isn't it?" *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Volume 64, pp. 202-04.

[23]*John*, 3.14-18.

> And this is the condemnation that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, *because their deeds were evil. For every one that doeth evil hateth light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved.*
> But he that doeth truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God....[24]

Thus, those who disbelieve in Jesus fail to do so because they are guilty of evil, and those who do believe in him do so because they "doeth truth"!

And what is truth-doing? The Gospel provides the answer. Jesus has fed five thousand from just five loaves and two fish. Apprehensive that they may anoint him king, he leaves for the mountain. By the time he returns, his disciples have left in the ship to cross the sea. He treads over water and joins them. Next day the people who saw the ship leave without him are astonished to see him on the other shore. How come?, they want to know. Jesus tells them that they seek him not because of any genuine hunger for the ever-lasting life but because they were so well-fed in spite of the food being so little. Devote yourselves to the ever-lasting life, he counsels. What shall we do that we might work the works of God?, they ask.

"This is the work of God," Jesus answers, *"that ye believe on him whom He hath sent."*[25]

The exchanges continue, some continue to doubt, some believe. "I am the living bread which came down from heaven," Jesus tells them. "If any man eat of this bread, he shall live forever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world." But how can this man give us his flesh to eat?, the Jews ask among themselves. "Verily, verily, I say unto you," Jesus answers, *"Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you...."*[26]

Hence, not only must you believe in the version of God that the Bible contains, not only must you believe in Jesus

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[24] *John*, 3.19-21. [25] *John*, 6.29. [26] *John*, 6.51-58.

being what the Gospels claim him to be, not only must you believe in those who are propagating that story, you must observe the rituals that the Church has devised – baptism, the eucharist, "eating the flesh and drinking the blood of Jesus".... Is each step in this not entirely a matter of faith? Is the basis for any of the steps better grounded than the corresponding steps and admonitions in Islam that one must believe in Allah, in Muhammad, in the *haj, namaz,* paying *zakat,* etc.?

"I am the true vine," Jesus proclaims, "and my Father is the husbandman."[27] "Abide in me, and I in you," Jesus says. *"As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me.* I am the vine, ye are the branches: he that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: *for without me ye can do nothing.*" "If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered," he warns, "and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned." On the other hand, "If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you."[28] To believe or not in the propositions is entirely a matter of faith.

Either way, this being the dogma – "If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned" – which of the two is legitimized: regard for other faiths, or the Inquisition? History provides the answer: this very verse used to be cited as the foundation for the Inquistion!

Jesus settles the matter beyond doubt. "If I had not come and spoken unto them, they had not had sin: but now they have no cloak for their sin. He that hateth me hateth my Father also. If I had not done among them the works which none other man did, they had not had sin: but now they have both seen and hated both me and my Father."[29] Jesus reiterates the warning: it is good for you, he tells his disconsolate disciples that I go away, for if I do not go, your

[27] *John*, 15.1. [28] *John*, 15.4-7. [29] *John*, 15.22-24.

next Comforter shall not come; but having gone, I will send him; "And when he is come, he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment," Jesus says; and what is the sin for which the Comforter will bring the world to book?; *"Of sin, because they believe not in me,"* Jesus declares.[30]

The Vedas teach us to pray for the well-being of every one and everything – inanimate as well as animate without distinction. And what is the prayer Jesus sends up to God as his earthly journey draws to a close? "I pray for them [his disciples]: *I pray not for the world,* but for them which Thou hast given me; for they are Thine. And all mine are Thine, and Thine are mine: and I am glorified in them." He enlarges the circle a little later, and yet strictly circumscribes it: "Neither pray I for these alone," Jesus tells God, "but for them also *which shall believe on me through their word....*"[31]

Broad-minded? Ecumenical? Tolerant?

Indeed, the question is not only: is this broad-minded, ecumenical, tolerant? But *can it be* any of these?

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[30] *John,* 16.8-9.

[31] *John,* 17.9-10, 20.

From "our brethren" to "rapacious wolves" in one short leap

26

Deification-at-second-remove, its uses and consequences

This deification-at-second-remove, so to say, of the Church continues to our times. The decrees of what is widely regarded as the most liberal of Church-Councils, the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, themselves provide ample evidence of this.

The God-at-hand, the Jesus-at-hand

The principal decree on the subject that the Council passed was the "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church."[1] In accordance with His divine plan to raise man, the Council proclaimed, God had "predestined before time began" that Jesus would proceed forth, the image of God. Moreover, "He [God] determined to call together in holy Church those who should believe in Christ. *Already present in figure at the beginning of the world, this Church* was prepared in marvelous fashion...."[2] "The Son, accordingly, came, sent by the Father who, before the foundation of the world, chose us and predestined us in him for adoptive sonship...."[3] In a word, while in the Gospels, Jesus is the one who has existed before creation as the Word, according to the Church, the Church has existed from the very beginning of the world! It has existed since then by the express design of God!

Not just that. God continues to be present in the Church,

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[1] *Lumen Gentium, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church,* 21 November, 1964.

[2] *Ibid.*, 2. [3] *Ibid.*, 3.

and to actively guide and direct it. "The Spirit dwells in the Church and in the hearts of the faithful, as in a temple," the Council declared. In them He prays, it said, and bears witness to their adoptive sonship. He guides the Church in the way of all truth, it said, He unifies her in communion and in the works of ministry, He bestows upon her varied hierarchic and charismatic gifts, and in this way directs her. He adorns her with His fruits. He renews her constantly. He leads her to perfect union with her Spouse, Jesus. [And for each of these, as for the assertions which follow, the Council cited – as proof! – fragments of lines and passages from *Romans, Corinthians, Galatians*, etc., the very documents one of the principal functions for composing which had been to assert these very propositions!]

The Church is rightly described by the many names which are used for it, the Council said: the house of God in which His family dwells, the dwelling place of God among men, and, especially, the holy temple. The Church has been correctly likened to the New Jerusalem, it said, "the holy city which is seen by John as it comes down from out of heaven from God when the world is made anew, prepared like a bride adorned for her husband." The Church has been called "that Jerusalem which is above," it recalled approvingly, and "our mother", as "the spotless spouse of the spotless lamb." "It is she whom Christ 'loved and for whom he delivered himself up that he might sanctify her,'" the Council declared. "It is she whom he unites to himself by the unbreakable alliance, and whom he constantly 'nourishes and cherishes'.... It is she whom, once purified he willed to be joined to himself, subject in love and fidelity,.... and whom, finally, he filled with heavenly gifts for all eternity...."[4]

"The head of this body is Christ," the Council asserted on behalf of the Church. And all it does is at his express direction: "He continually provides in his body, that is in the Church, for gifts of ministries through which, by his power,

[4] *Ibid.*, 6.

we serve each other unto salvation, so that, carrying out the truth in love, we may through all things grow unto him who is our head."[5] He has suffused the Church with his Spirit, and it is this Spirit "which gives life to, unifies and moves the whole body." Moreover, "Christ loves the Church as his bride...."[6] "The one mediator, Christ, established and ever sustains here on earth his holy Church.... through which he communicates truth and grace to all men...."[7]

To establish the Church's authority, to make accepting that authority to be an over-riding article of faith, the Council deployed a typical circularity. "The Church.... is held, as a matter of faith, to be unfailingly holy," it said. On what basis? "This is because Christ, the Son of God, who with the Father and the Spirit is hailed as 'alone holy' loved the Church as his Bride, giving himself up for her so as to sanctify her....; he joined her to himself as his body and endowed her with the gift of the Holy Spirit for the glory of God...."[8] But that is no "reason" – every knot in that string is just an assertion, another series one must take on faith.

Having positioned itself as the Jesus-at-hand, the Church fosters another superimposition. After all, the strong human urge for worshipping the mother-goddess has ensured that it isn't just Jesus who is venerated. The cult of Virgin Mary has acquired enormous force over the centuries. Unable to erase it, the Church, as we have seen, has appropriated it – with caveats. But as it is there in any case, the Church has put it to use in another way. We are the Mary-at-hand, it has declared!

Thus we have Vatican-II superimposing the Church on Mary also in its decree, *Lumen Gentium*,

> By reason of the gift and role of her divine motherhood, by which she is united with her Son, the Redeemer, and with her unique graces and functions, the Blessed Virgin is also intimately united with the Church....

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[5] *Ibid.*, 7. [6] *Ibid.*, 7.
[7] *Ibid.*, 8. [8] *Ibid.*, 39.

> The Church indeed contemplating her hidden sanctity, imitating her charity and faithfully fulfilling the Father's will, by receiving the Word of God in faith becomes herself a mother. By preaching and baptism she brings forth sons, who are conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of God, to a new and immortal life. She herself is a virgin, who keeps in its entirety and purity the faith she pledged to her spouse. Imitating the mother of her Lord, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, she keeps intact faith, firm hope and sincere charity....[9]

The Church's indissoluble relationship to the Holy Spirit and Jesus having been asserted, the next step is as inevitable as it is predictable. "Basing itself on scripture and tradition," the Council declared, "it teaches that the Church, a pilgrim now on earth, is *necessary for salvation*: the one Christ is mediator and the way of salvation; he is present to us in his body which is the Church. He himself expressly asserted the necessity of faith and baptism...., and thereby affirmed at the same time the necessity of the Church which men enter through baptism as through a door. *Hence they could not be saved who, knowing that the Catholic Church was founded as necessary by God through Christ, would refuse either to enter it, or to remain in it.*"[10]

First there is nothing but God. And His Word. He makes His Word flesh, that is He sends Jesus down to earth. Jesus the Son becomes the Word, thence God. The Church is his body, his bride, the one he loves, and guides, whose cause he oversees and advances. As Mary comes to be venerated on her own, she becomes the Mother of the Son, then the first among the members of the Church, then the Mother of the faithful, and soon the Church becomes the Mother-at-hand.

The Church wrests Authority *via* another route also. All millenarian ideologies take five steps to total control. They assert that there is but one fount, one ultimate Authority: a single, solid, incomparable, undifferentiable God, or, as in

[9] *Ibid.*, 63-64.

[10] *Ibid.*, 14.

Marxism-Leninism, History; that one Authority has revealed the truth to one man; that one man has put that truth down in one Book – the Bible, the Quran, the works of Marx-Lenin-Mao; that Book is very difficult to understand; knowing this, that one ultimate Authority has given the faculty of understanding and interpreting that one Book to one entity alone, and hence we are in dire need of that intermediary – the Church, the Ulema, the Party.

The Church, like the Party in Communist and Nazi States, asserts the last step with as much vehemence as any of the other steps. The sacred tradition and the sacred Scripture, declared Vatican-II in *Dei verbum*, "form one sacred deposit of the Word of God." And this Word has been "committed to the Church." It emphasized that "the task of authentically interpreting the Word of God, whether written or handed on, has been *entrusted exclusively* to the living teaching office of the Church, whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ." Each of the two words deserve attention – individually and together: "entrusted" – the implication being that God and Jesus have entrusted this responsibility to the Church; as well as, "exclusively" – that no other organization has been similarly charged with that responsibility.

By a typical sleight of words, in the garb of declaring its subordinate role, the Church asserts its unquestionable, overriding authority: "This teaching office is not above the Word of God," *Dei Verbum* declared with becoming modesty, "but serves it, *teaching only what has been handed on, listening to it devoutly, guarding it scrupulously and explaining it fully in accord with a divine commission and with the help of the Holy Spirit;* it draws from this one deposit of faith everything which it presents for belief as divinely revealed."[11] Notice, the effect: what the Church teaches is "only what has been handed on," it is the Church – alone – which is "listening to it

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[11] *Ibid.*, 10.

devoutly, guarding it scrupulously, explaining it faithfully;" for this it – alone – has "divine commission", for this it – alone – has "the help of the Holy Spirit."

The operational implications are as immediate as they are exclusive. "It is clear, therefore" – notice the *"therefore"*, as if the preceding passage had consisted of evidence and logic, rather than a string of assertions – "that sacred tradition, sacred scripture and the teaching authority of the Church, in accord with God's most wise design, are so linked and joined together that *one cannot stand without the others,* and that all together and each in its own way under the action of the one Holy Spirit contribute effectively to the salvation of souls."[12] That is, without the third component – the teaching authority of the Church – even the Word of God is of no avail!

True, the sacred Scripture was transcribed by human hands; true, it has to be interpreted; true, scholars may devote themselves to this task – but within limits: "For all of what has been said about the way of interpreting Scripture," Vatican-II proclaimed, "is subject finally to the judgment of the Church, which carries out the divine commission and ministry of guarding and interpreting the Word of God."[13]

Of all the Scriptures, the Council declared, even among those constituting the New Testament, the Gospels "have a special preeminence." "The Church has always and everywhere held, and continues to hold, that the four Gospels are of apostolic origin," it specified. "For what the Apostles preached in fulfillment of the commission of Christ, afterwards they themselves and apostolic men, under the inspiration of the divine Spirit, handed on to us in writing: the foundation of the faith, namely, the fourfold Gospel, according to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John."[14] Notice, the attempt at balancing: the Council has to steer clear of attributing the Gospels to the Apostles – hence, the ambiguous, "afterwards they themselves [the Apostles] and apostolic men;" similarly, the concession that some among

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[12] *Ibid.*, 10. [13] *Ibid.*, 12. [14] *Ibid.*, 18.

these – the Apostles or apostolic men – wrote the Gospels balanced by the assertion that they did so "under the inspiration of the divine Spirit."

Either way, the Church continues to maintain that every statement in each Gospel is wholly correct. "Holy Mother Church," Vatican-II pronounced, "has firmly and with absolute constancy held, and continues to hold, that the four Gospels just named, whose historical character the Church unhesitatingly asserts, faithfully hand on what Jesus Christ, while living among men, really did and taught for their eternal salvation until the day He was taken up into heaven (see *Acts* 1:1-2). Indeed, after the ascension of the Lord the Apostles handed on to their hearers what he had said and done. This they did with that clearer understanding which they enjoyed after they had been instructed by the glorious events of Christ's life and taught by the light of the Spirit of truth...."[15]

Vatican-II affirmed that not just the four Gospels but the epistles of Paul and other apostolic writings which were later accepted as being part of the New Testament were "composed under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit."[16]

In a word, the Gospels have God as their author, they were transcribed by human hand but in this too the hand moved "under divine inspiration," the Gospels are therefore historical documents, they set out facts, each incident or expression they narrate is the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. That claim is not just something that was reaffirmed a hundred and thirty years ago by Vatican-I, it is the claim of the Church today.

And in practice who is the Church?

But, the Church is not a disembodied abstraction. In practice it is the Pope and the hierarchy he appoints. Hence, the Council repeatedly asserted its faith in *"the primacy of the*

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[15] *Ibid.*, 19. [16] *Ibid.*, 20.

Roman Pontiff and his infallible teaching office." It stressed again and again that this *"must be firmly believed by all the faithful."*[17] It declared that it is *"the Holy Spirit which appointed them* [the bishops, etc.] to shepherd the Church of God," that "the bishops have *by divine institution* taken the place of the apostles as pastors of the Church, in such wise that *whoever listens to them is listening to Christ and whoever despises them despises Christ and Him who sent Christ,"* that "though seated at the right hand of God the Father, he [Jesus] is not absent from the assembly of his pontiffs; on the contrary indeed, *it is above all through their signal service that he* preaches the Word of God to all peoples and administers without cease to the faithful the sacraments of faith; that *through their paternal care he incorporates,* by a supernatural rebirth, new members into this body; that, finally, *through their wisdom and prudence he directs and guides* the people of the New Testament on their journey towards eternal beatitude...."[18]

Ensuring power for the Church

At every opportunity the Church stresses that *all* the people of God have an ineluctable missionary obligation.[19] The practical effect of this, of course, is that every Christian is put to work for aggrandizing the kingdom and power of the Church. But there is always a danger even in useful things! After all, as each has a missionary obligation, many can conclude that they shall discharge the obligation in the manner they – themselves – deem best. The Church balances its exhortations, therefore, by setting up banks within which the duty is to run.

First, God speaks through "Christ in Church", the Church

[17] *Ibid.*, 18. [18] *Ibid.*, 20.
[19] See, for instance, *Ecclesiae sanctae III, Norms for implementing the Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity,* 6 August, 1966.

keeps dinning into the faithful. This assertion is slipped in almost subliminally, but repeatedly and with conclusive force: "It is necessary, therefore, – especially in today's circumstances," the Synod of Bishops told the faithful in *Ratione habita*, its pronouncement *On Dangerous Opinions*, "that the faith with which man makes his response to God, *who speaks through Christ in the Church*, be constantly cultivated and strengthened...."[20] And just a little later again, "All the faithful, in any case, are to be taught clearly, and in ways adapted to the present mentality, about *the filial obedience and sincere adherence owed to the declarations of the teaching authority in the Church*, all according to the different nature of the different pronouncements...."[21] It is "a personal and immediate relationship *with Christ in the Church*" which, the Church says, "should still for the faithful of today sustain their whole spiritual lives."[22] In a word, a person just cannot be faithful unless he is faithful to the Church, the Church declares:

> There is, therefore, a very close connection between Christ, the Church and evangelization. During this 'era of the Church' the task of evangelization *is entrusted to her. This task cannot be carried out without her, and much less in opposition to her*. It is expedient to recall this truth because in these days we hear, not without grief, of men, in good faith, as we like to believe, but certainly misguided, who frequently declare that they are willing to love Christ but not the Church. The absurdity of this distinction appears clearly from those words of the Gospel: 'He who rejects you rejects me'. How can anyone claim to love Christ without loving his Church in the face of that most striking testimony given by St. Paul: 'Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her'.[23]

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[20] Synod of Bishops, *Ratione habita, On Dangerous Opinions*, 28 October, 1967, 2.1.

[21] *Ibid.*, 2.1.

[22] Synod of Bishops, *Ultimis temporibus, The Ministerial Priesthood*, 30 November, 1967, I.2.

[23] Paul VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi*, 8 December, 1975, 16.

From "God", to "God in Christ", to "Christ in the Church" in one short leap!

Similarly, recall the declaration on indulgences. As is well known, indulgences have been a source of much power for the Church, and much lucre. Were the elements that underlie the practice true – that merits are transferable, that we can liberate ourselves as well as others – including those who have died – from the consequences of their sins through indulgences, these indulgences would, in a sense, make it possible for an individual to exempt himself as well as others from the consequences by doing the acts of penance himself.

But that would cut out the intermediary ! And so, even as it reiterates all the suppositions underlying the practice as if they were proven facts, the Church is careful to slip in assertions to ensure that power remains in its hands. "However, the belief was not that individual members of the Church worked for the remission of their brethren's sins by their own merits alone," it stresses, "but that the whole Church as a single body united to Christ its Head was bringing about satisfaction."[24] It asserts that the bishops made a prudent judgment about the ways in which and the extent to which a Christian could secure remission for his sins and those of others – for instance, the dead. As proof, as authority, it quotes – of all things! – Pope Clement VI's Bull,

> God's only-begotten Son.... has won a treasure for the militant Church.... he has entrusted it to blessed Peter, the key-bearer of heaven, and to his successors who are Christ's vicars on earth, so that they may distribute it to the faithful for their salvation. They may apply it with mercy for reasonable causes to all who have repented for and have confessed their sins. At times they may remit completely, and at other times only partially, the temporal punishment due to sin in a general as in special ways (insofar as they judge it to be fitting in the sight of the Lord). The merits of the Blessed

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[24]Pope Paul VI, ***Indulgentiarum doctrina, Apostolic Constitution on the Revision of Indulgences***, 1 January, 1967, 6.

> Mother of God and of all the elect.... are known to add further to this treasure.[25]

Not only is there such a reservoir, not only can merits from it be transferred so that sins of others are remitted, not only does the Church have the power to transfer the merits, not only does *it alone* have the power to do so, the obtaining of the indulgence itself becomes the occasion to reinforce obedience to the Church! For the Pope declares,

> .... we ought not to forget that when they try to gain indulgences the faithful submit with docility to the lawful pastors of the Church. Above all, they acknowledge the authority of the successor of Blessed Peter, the key-bearer of heaven. To them the Saviour himself entrusted the task of feeding his flock and ruling his Church....[26]

At the pinnacle

And at the apex sits the Pontiff of Rome – so that all these assertions culminate in establishing his overriding, peremptory authority. Having asserted repeatedly how it is through the signal service, the paternal care and through the wisdom and prudence of the collectivity of the bishops that Jesus acts, the Council declared, "The college or body of bishops has for all that no authority unless united with the Roman Pontiff, Peter's successor, as its head, whose primatial authority, let it be added, over all, whether pastors or faithful, remains its integrity. For the Roman Pontiff, by reason of his office as Vicar of Christ, namely, and as the pastor of the entire Church, has full, supreme and universal power over the whole Church, a power which he can always exercise unhindered...."[27]

Specifically, "The Roman Pontiff.... enjoys this infallibility in virtue of his office, when, as supreme pastor and teacher of all the faithful.... he proclaims in an absolute decision a

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[25] *Ibid.*, 7. [26] *Ibid.*, 10. [27] *Ibid.*, 22.

doctrine pertaining to faith or morals.... For that reason his decisions are rightly said to be irreformable by their very nature and not by reason of the assent of the Church, in as much as they were made with the assistance of the Holy Spirit promised to him in the person of blessed Peter himself; and as a consequence they are in no way in need of the approval of others, and do not admit of appeal to any other tribunal...."[28] For all the changes which had occurred since, in this regard Vatican-II asserted to the dot what had been claimed on behalf of the Pope by Vatican-I – the Ecumenical Council convened by Pius IX in 1869-1870. That Council had proclaimed that when the Pope spoke *ex cathedra* – that is, when he prescribed the doctrine regarding faith or morals which the entire Church must hold – he was infallible.

The position of the Pope is supreme, declares the Vatican again and again, and that it is in accordance with the command of Jesus, it maintains. A notable feature of all such assertions is their self-serving nature. There was no formal Church in Jesus' lifetime. He did indeed gather a handful of disciples, but he did not organize them into any hierarchical organization. Over the centuries the Church has built its position, assertion by assertion:

- Jesus chose the apostles;
- From among them, he chose Peter to be the principal one;
- As the Pope is the successor of Peter, he is supreme!

Here is a typical formulation of the position – this one by the Pope himself, in his *Evangelii nuntiandi,*

> The universal Church has been called to preach the Gospel.... First we may recall with what earnestness the Lord enjoined on the apostles the task of proclaiming the message.... He chose them.... He appointed them and sent them forth as witnesses and teachers.... And the twelve in their turn sent forth their successors who, following in the footsteps of the apostles, continued to preach the Gospel.

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[28] *Ibid.*, 25.

It is therefore by the will of Christ [notice the leap] that the successor of Peter is endowed with the pre-eminent responsibility of teaching revealed truth. How often does the New Testament represent Peter as being filled with the Holy Spirit when he spoke in the name of all. So also St. Leo the Great says of him that he merited the primacy of the apostles. It is for this reason likewise that the solemn declaration of the Church has affirmed that the Supreme Pontiff is the supreme head – *in apice in specula* – of the apostolate. The second Vatican Council has declared that 'Christ's mandate to preach the Gospel to the whole creation (cf. Mk 16, 15) is directed primarily to the bishops with Peter and in subordination to Peter.'[29]

In this statement, because of the conclusion it can extract – namely, primacy for the Pope – the Church makes out that the command of Jesus to preach the Gospel was "directed primarily to the bishops with Peter and in subordination to Peter." On other occasions, as we shall see in a moment, the focus is reversed: when the occasion demands that every Christian be impelled to convert, the Church declares that the command of Jesus is meant for every single Christian.

Not only is the Pope supreme, he is infallible – that is not a creed of the middle ages, it is the article of faith for today. In his declaration *Credo of the People of God,* the Pope states,

....The Holy Spirit unfailingly assists her [The Church – the bride and body of Christ.] in her charge of guarding, teaching, explaining, and spreading that truth which was foreshadowed in the prophets and which God fully and completely revealed to men in the Lord Jesus. [So much for the identical claim made on behalf of Muhammad and the Quran !] We believe all that is contained in the word of God, whether written or handed down, and which the Church proposes for our belief as being divinely revealed either through a solemn declaration or by the ordinary and universal magesterium. We believe in the infallibility enjoyed by the Successor of Peter when he speaks *ex cathedra* as shepherd and teacher of all the faithful, an

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[29]Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi, Evangelization in the Modern World,* 8 December, 1975, 66-67.

infallibility which the whole Episcopate also enjoys when it exercises with him the supreme magesterium.[30]

So, every word of the Bible is literally true, and every verdict that the Pope hands down on matters of doctrine and interpretation is literally infallible, and therefore beyond challenge.

The peremptory duty of believers

Now, the propositions that the Church is but the body of Jesus, that it is suffused with Jesus, that all it does is at the express direction of Jesus and the Holy Spirit, that the Church is the Pope and the bishops, etc., he appoints, that together they are infallible – this cascade of assertions yields, ineluctably, the lemma: that the faithful must obey them absolutely. The lemma finds full emphasis and elaboration in the decrees of Vatican-II.

Those who believe in Christ and the doctrines which have been set afoot in his name are, of course, the people who have been chosen by God Himself: the Vatican-II decrees refer to them as "the People of God," as "the holy People of God." That being so, and the Pope and the hierarchy of the Church under him being the representatives of God and Jesus, the legatees of Peter, "Bishops who teach *in communion with* the Roman Pontiff [Note the qualifying phrase: "who teach in communion with the Roman Pontiff" – those who stray from the Party-line are automatically excluded!] are to be revered by all as witnesses of divine and Catholic truth; the faithful, for their part, are obliged to submit to their bishops' decision, made in the name of Christ, in matters of faith and morals, and to adhere to it with a ready and respectful allegiance of mind. This loyal submission of

[30]Pope Paul VI, *Solemni hac liturgia, The Credo of the People of God,* 30 June, 1968.

the will and intellect must be given, in a special way to the teaching of the Roman Pontiff, even when he does not speak *ex cathedra* in such wise, indeed, that his supreme teaching authority be acknowledged with respect, and sincere assent be given to decisions made by him, conformably with his manifest mind and intention...."[31] All the more, "when the Roman Pontiff, or the body of bishops together with him, define a doctrine, they make the definition in conformity with revelation itself, to which all are bound to adhere and to which they are obliged to submit; and this revelation is transmitted integrally either in written form or in oral tradition through the legitimate succession of bishops and above all through the watchful concern of the Roman Pontiff himself – and through the light of the Spirit of truth it is scrupulously preserved in the Church and unerringly explained...."[32]

The Council conceded that occasions may arise when believers may need to put their concerns and needs to the Church. They may do so, it said. But within a narrow pen: "If the occasion should arise this should be done through the institutions established by the Church for that purpose and always with truth, courage, prudence and with reverence and charity towards those who, by reason of their office, represent the person of Christ." Hence, "Like all Christians, the laity should promptly accept in Christian obedience what is decided by the pastors who, as teachers and rulers of the Church, represent Christ. In this they will follow Christ's example who, by his obedience unto death, opened the blessed way of liberty of the sons of God to all men." The faithful must not just obey these persons who occupy offices of the Church, the Council decreed: "Nor should they fail to commend to God in their prayers those who have been placed over them, who indeed keep watch as having to render an account of our souls, that they may do this with joy and not with grief...."[33]

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[31] *Lumen Gentium, op. cit.*, 25. [32] *Ibid.*, 25. [33] *Ibid.*, 37.

Evangelize, you must, but under the Church!

Even while asserting that it is the duty of every Christian to evangelize, even while declaring that the test of whether his conversion has been genuine or not is whether the new convert in turn converts others, the Church insists that the duty to evangelize is *that of the Church*. That is, every individual Christian, every Christian organization should evangelize, each of them should bring non-Christians for conversion – but all of them must do so under the overall authority and seal of the Church: the cause of Christianity, in a word, must not be pursued in such a way that the cause of the Church is diluted!

Accordingly, the Church comes down sternly on those who preach the Gospel but criticize the Church for being "institutional", on those who claim that in preaching the word of God they "shall act on their own." "....The work of evangelization is not an individual activity," the Church stresses, "*it is essentially ecclesial.* Accordingly, when the humblest preacher, catechist or pastor is preaching the Gospel, *he is acting on behalf of the Church.... He must exercise his function in closest communion with the Church and her pastors.*" "It is.... the whole Church which evangelizes," the Church emphasizes. "Therefore, both for the whole world and for every part of it, *it is the Church which has the responsibility of spreading the Gospel.*"[34]

What does all this leave for Ecumenism?

"Only the God of Jesus Christ is the living God," writes the present Pope in his *Crossing the Threshold of Hope.* And he italicizes the words.[35] And Jesus alone is the way to that one

[34]Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi, Evangelization in the Modern World,* 8 December, 1975, 58-60.

[35]Pope John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope,* edited by Vittorio Messori, Alfred A Knopf, New York, 1994, p. 28.

God: he cites as authority the *Pastoral Constitution: On the Church in the Modern World* decreed by Vatican-II. "The Church firmly believes that Christ, who died and was raised up for all, can through His Spirit offer man the light and the strength to measure up to his supreme destiny," the Council had declared. *"Nor has any other name under the heaven been given to man by which it is fitting for him to be saved. She also believes that in her most benign Lord and Master can be found the key, the focal point and the goal of man, as well as of all human history...."*[36] Jesus is unique, the Pope asserts again and again. Socrates, Buddha, Mohammed come nowhere near him, he says. *"He is the one mediator between God and humanity,"* says the Pope – again italicizing the words.[37]

Given these two propositions, what regard can the Church have for other religions? Its public relations machinery in countries such as India has, of course, made much of Vatican-II. Churchmen here inveigle that Vatican-II recognized that there are many ways to salvation, that because of decisions taken at the Council the Church now looks upon all religions with the same high regard.

In fact, that is not, and was never the case. Vatican-II stated the position of the Church in regard to other religions in its declaration, *Nostra Aetate*. "The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions," it declared. As meaningless a statement as it is harmless! For it concedes nothing. For the question is: in the reckoning of the Church, what exactly is true and holy in other religions? And the answer to that remains the old one: that in which these other religions conform to what the Catholic Church holds to be true and holy! The Council's elaboration was condescension itself: "She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though

[36] *Gaudium et spes,* proclaimed by Pope Paul on 7 December, 1965, 10. And *Crossing the Threshold of Hope, op. cit.*, pp. 29-30.

[37] *Crossing the Threshold of Hope, op. cit.*, pp. 42-44.

differing in many aspects from the ones which she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect *a ray of that Truth* which enlightens all men." The Council added in the same breath, "Indeed, she proclaims, and ever must proclaim Christ, 'the way, the truth, and the life'(*John,* 14,6), in whom men may find the fullness of religious life, in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself."[38]

It is this passage which the present Pope emphasizes – it is only this condescending acknowledgment which he allows: that the Church accepts that which is true in other religions. But what exactly do these other religions contain? The Pope's answer puts them in their place, as it should all who trumpet the new spirit of the Church as ecumenical! As if this were the soul of broad-mindedness, the Pope says, "The words of the Council recall the conviction, long rooted in the Tradition, of the existence of the so-called *semina Verbi* (seeds of the Word), present in all religions." That is all that Hinduism and Buddhism might at best have: seeds of the Word, of the Word which blossomed in full in and only in Christianity – to which he, the Pope, and only he is the infallible guide!

Indeed, even this acknowledgment, the Pope regards as reflecting not so much an intrinsic truth as proof of the Church's universalism! And universalism has a very special meaning for him and the Church. It doesn't mean that there is no difference in the eyes of God between the believer and the non-believer, to say nothing of the eyes of the Church. It doesn't mean that all religions are paths that lead equally efficaciously to God. It only means that the Church is anxious to save all in the universe by bringing them round to Jesus! As the Pope puts the point,

> In the light of this conviction, the Church seeks to identify the *semina Verbi* present in the great traditions of the Far East, in order to trace a

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[38]*Nostra Aetate, Declaration on the relation of the Church to non-Christian religions,* 28 October, 1965, 2.

> common path against the backdrop of the needs of the contemporary world. We can affirm here that the Council is inspired by a *truly universal concern*. The Church is guided by the faith that *God the Creator wants to save all humankind in Jesus Christ,* the only mediator between God and man, inasmuch as he is the redeemer of all humankind. The Paschal Mystery is equally available to all, and, through it, the way to eternal salvation is also open to all.[39]

And for that act of kindness and grace of the Church we must be forever grateful!

What is valid in Islam, therefore, are those elements which it has retained from, or at the least has in common with Christianity.[40] What is valid in Judaism is that the beginnings of the faith and election of the Church of Christ "are found already among the Patriarchs, Moses and the prophets, and in that "the salvation of the Church is mysteriously foreshadowed by the chosen people's exodus from the land of bondage."[41]

The fundamental position remains unaltered, unyielding: "One Lord, one faith, one baptism."[42] So, while the Council expressed "esteem" for the Muslims, this is subject to its repeated declarations that the revelation given to Jesus was the final one! "Now God, in order to establish peace or the communion of sinful human beings with Himself, as well as to fashion them into a fraternal community," the Council declared, "did ordain to intervene in human history *in a way both new and final* by sending His Son, clothed in our flesh, in order that through Him He might snatch men from the power of darkness and Satan...."[43] Similarly, in *Dei Verbum,* its Declaration on Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, the Council decreed, "The Christian dispensation, therefore, as the new and definitive covenant, will never pass away and *we now await no further public revelation*

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[39] *Beyond the Threshold of Hope, op. cit.*, pp. 80-81.

[40] *Nostra Aetate, op. cit.*, 3. [41] *Ibid.*, 4.

[42] The expression from *Ephesians,* 4:4-5, was often invoked by Vatican-II.

[43] *Ad Gentes, Decree on the Mission Activity of the Church,* 3.

before the glorious manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ...."[44] When the first and fundamental article of faith of the Muslim is so resolutely put down – for he believes that the revelation to Muhammad was the final one – what worth is the "esteem" the Church professes for him?

Indeed, what is for the Church the very basis for its existence leaves little scope for what we understand tolerance to mean. The singular objective of missionary activity is to gather in an ever larger harvest of souls for Jesus. The Church asserts that this activity "derives its reason from *the will of God,* 'who wishes *all men* to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. *For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men,* Himself a man, Jesus Christ, who gave Himself as a ransom for all' (I *Tim.* 2:4-5), 'neither is there salvation in any other' (*Acts* 4:12). Therefore *all must be converted to Him,* made known by the Church's preaching, and *all must be incorporated into Him by baptism, and into the Church which is His body.* For Christ Himself 'by stressing in express language the necessity of faith and baptism...., at the same time confirmed the necessity of the Church, into which men enter by baptism, as by a door. *Therefore those men cannot be saved, who though aware that God, through Jesus Christ, founded the Church as something necessary, still do not wish to enter into it, or to persevere in it.*'...." That being the will of God, "though God in ways known to Himself can lead those inculpably ignorant of the Gospels to find *that faith without which it is impossible to please Him*...., yet *a necessity lies upon the Church*...., and at the same time *a sacred duty,* to preach the Gospel. And hence missionary activity today as always retains its power and necessity." "By means of this activity," the Council's decree continued, "the Mystical Body of Christ *unceasingly gathers and directs its forces towards its own growth*.... The

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[44] *Dei verbum,* Declaration on Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, 4.

members of the Church *are impelled* to carry on such missionary activity by reason of the love with which they love God and by which they desire to share with all men the spiritual goods of both this life and the life to come."[45]

That being the case – that no one who does not embrace the Church can be saved, and that the Church is bound by divine command, as well as by its love for those who need to be saved, to convert everyone – "ecumenism", "dialogue" and the rest can only be devices: devices to prise away followers of other religions.

Yes, the division is a scandal, but ....

".... However, many Christian communions present themselves to men as the true inheritors of Jesus Christ," Vatican-II noted in *Unitatis Redintegratio*, its *Decree on Ecumenism*, "all indeed profess to be followers of the Lord but they differ in mind and go their different ways, as if Christ Himself were divided." "Certainly", the Council affirmed, "such division openly contradicts the will of Christ, scandalizes the world, and damages the most holy cause, the preaching of the Gospel to every creature."[46] The Council acknowledged that for the divisions "men on both sides were to blame,"[47] and it proposed a series of measures – "dialogue", etc. – to bring the differing denominations among Christians closer together.

But in this very decree, the Church of Rome asserted its primacy, it asserted more than once that it is the one, true way. "It is through the faithful preaching of the Gospel by *the Apostles and their successors – the bishops with Peter's successor at their head* – through *their* administering the sacraments, and through *their* governing in love, that Jesus

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[45] *Ad Gentes, Decree on the Mission Activity of the Church*, 7 December, 1965, 7.

[46] *Unitatis redintegratio, Decree on Ecumenism*, 21 November, 1964, 1.

[47] *Ibid.*, 3.

Christ wishes His people to increase, under the action of the Holy Spirit...."[48] Even as it affirmed that men on both sides were responsible for the divisions that took place, even as it professed "respect and affection" for those who had broken away, the Council inveigled the primacy of the Catholic Church: ".... It follows that the separated Churches and communities as such, *though we believe they suffer from the defects already mentioned,* have been by no means deprived of significance and importance in the mystery of salvation. For the Spirit of Christ has not refrained from using them as means of salvation *which derive their efficacy from the very fullness of grace and truth entrusted to the Catholic Church.*"

The sentences that followed nailed the point:

> Nevertheless, our separated brethren, whether considered as individuals or as communities and Churches, are not blessed with that unity which Jesus Christ wished to bestow on all those to whom he has given new birth into one body, and whom he has quickened to newness of life – that unity which the Holy Scriptures and the ancient Tradition of the Church proclaim. *For it is through Christ's Catholic Church alone, which is the universal help towards salvation, that the fullness of the means of salvation can be obtained. It was to the apostolic college alone, of which Peter is the head, that we believe our Lord entrusted all the blessings of the New Covenant, in order to establish on earth the one Body of Christ into which all those should be fully incorporated who belong in any way to the people of God....*[49]

It isn't just that only through Jesus is salvation possible, each denomination converting in the name of Jesus insists that it is only through its variant of Christianity that salvation is possible. Now that sectarian divisions have become, as the Church says, a scandal in the eyes of the world, it is careful to clothe its claim to superiority in verbiage of "compassion" and "love", but it never misses an opportunity to stress the superiority. Indeed, to fail to stress that fact, it declares,

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[48] *Ibid.*, 2. [49] *Ibid.*, 3.

would be a dereliction of duty – for it would leave people in doubt about which is the real path, it would expose them to the risk of choosing the wrong path and thereby missing out on being saved. "The Catholic Church is also assiduous in her solicitude for those Christians who are not in full communion with her," the all-important proclamation on evangelization declares, "she seeks to establish with them that unity which Christ desired and it is her aim to achieve this unity in truth. She appreciates that *she would be failing gravely in her duty if she did not bear witness to them of the fullness of revelation of which she is the depository....*"[50]

A telling anxiety

Ecumenism, yes, but not at the cost of our market-share – that seems to be the doctrine. Notice how anxious the Church is about marriages between Catholics and non-Catholics. After all, if all paths, in particular all Christian paths lead to God, how does it matter if the children of such marriages, or for that matter the Catholic who enters such a marriage observes one set of rituals or another? But that is emphatically *not* the way the Church sees the outcome.

In his declaration on the matter the Pope stresses, "such a marriage is by its nature an obstacle to the full spiritual communion of the married parties." And that, therefore, "the Church, conscious of her duty, discourages the contracting of mixed marriages, for she is most desirous that Catholics be able in matrimony to attain to perfect union of mind and full communion of life." Unless the marriage is preceded by obtaining a dispensation from the Church, such a marriage is invalid, he declares. And he lays down a stern condition:

> The faithful should therefore be reminded that the Catholic party to a marriage has the duty of preserving his or her own faith; nor is it ever

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[50]Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi*, 8 December, 1975, 54.

> permitted to expose oneself to a proximate danger of losing it. Furthermore, the Catholic partner in a mixed marriage is obliged, not only to remain steadfast in the faith, but also, as far as possible, to see that the children be baptized and brought up in that same faith and receive all those aids to eternal salvation which the Catholic Church provides for her sons and daughters.

The Pope accordingly lays down conditions on which alone a dispensation shall be given for a mixed marriage. Among these, for example, are the following:

> 4. To obtain from the local Ordinary dispensation from an impediment, the Catholic party shall declare that he is ready to remove dangers of falling away from the faith. He is also gravely bound to make a sincere promise to do all in his power to have all the children baptized and brought up in the Catholic Church.
> 5. At an opportune time the non-Catholic party must be informed of these promises which the Catholic party has to make, so that it is clear that he is cognizant of the promise and obligation on the part of the Catholic....[51]

Does such anxiety about market-share show any openness? Does it show that the Church actually believes that salvation is possible through other paths as well, even other Christian paths?

Declarations vis á vis *reality*

Subsequent events have accordingly proceeded along two routes. On the one side, joint declarations between the Pope and heads of other Churches have been signed, meetings, dialogues, etc., have come to be held with increasing frequency. On the other, *inter se* competition has intensified.

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[51]For the foregoing, Pope Paul VI, *Matrimonia mixta, Apostolic Letter on Mixed Marriages,* 7 January, 1970. See also, Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Matrimonii sacramentum, Instruction on Mixed Marriages,* 18 March, 1966.

Two typical news items will be enough to give a glimpse of what is going on in spite of the joint declarations and dialogue.

The first appeared in the *Houston Chronicle* of 13 October, 1992. Entitled, "Pope says he must shield church from 'wolves' of Protestantism," it was by Cecile Holmes White:

> Pope John Paul II (in the Dominican Republic) said that he must protect his flock from the 'wolves' of evangelical Protestantism wooing Latin Americans away from the Roman Catholic Church.....As shepherd to Latin America's 395 million Catholics, the Pope said he must 'take care of the sheep who have been put in my care and protect them from rapacious wolves.'

And for that metaphor too the Pope had precedent in the scripture. For does Matthew not warn, "Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves"?[52]

The second item is from the *Washington Post* of 24 January, 1999. Entitled, "Pope moves to reverse Catholicism's decline in America," it was filed by Molly Loore and John Ward Anderson:

> The document (On Americas) marks an evolution in the church's approach to the Americas and attempts to instill some of the very principles that have drawn its followers to burgeoning Protestant evangelical faiths.... (The Pope) has presided over massive defections from the Catholic Church in the Americas, home to more than half of the world's one billion Catholics. In Mexico, evangelical churches and other faiths have siphoned off as much as 10 percent of Catholics in recent decades.... In the southernmost state of Chiapas, site of the Zapatista rebel uprising in 1994, an estimated 30 percent of the population is now Protestant. 'We feel invaded by the avalanche of groups that are coming from north and east,' said Bishop

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[52]*Matthew*, 7.15.

> Trinidad Gonzales Rodriguez, who is based in Mexico's second-most populous city, Gudlajara. 'Now we are not only facing evangelism and Protestantism, but a high tide of New Age religions from the East.'

Such competition amidst cooperation? Wolves in the garb of brethren?

A few things to do

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A few things to do

As the campaign for the 1999 Lok Sabha elections intensified, two other incidents of alleged attacks on Christian missionaries hit the headlines – one in Orissa and the other in Bihar. Christian groups, and the secularists with even greater zeal, at once painted them as the handiwork of raving Hindu fundamentalists.

A mob of tribals armed with bows and arrows was reported to have killed one Reverend Arul Doss on the night of 1 September, 1999. The murder took place in a remote village located deep inside a forest area. As the priest had been attacked while he was asleep, and as the tribals burnt the thatched hut which housed the church, it was quickly assumed that Dara Singh had been at the root of this murder also. From that, propagandists jumped to the usual theory: raving Hindu fundamentalists murder priest.

The Home Secretary of the Orissa Government was quoted by a Calcutta daily as having observed that "Catholic priests are trying to separate families after converting tribals and others which is leading to social tensions." Instead of reflecting on what the official was saying – his assessment reinforced what Justice Wadhwa had been told about the disruption conversion visits on communities and families – secularists and Christian missionaries pounced on the Home Secretary, and demanded that he be removed from his post!

In the next incident a nun, Sister Ruby, was reported to have been abducted from an auto-rickshaw in Chhapra, North Bihar, on 20 September, 1999. Her abductors were said to have tried to rape her, and, having failed, they were said to

have forced her to drink a bottle of their urine. An FIR was filed. The Church again ascribed the abduction to Hindu fundamentalists. Secularists flew into their accustomed rage. "Outrage at Chhapra", thundered *The Statesman* in its editorial on 30 September, 1999. "After MP, Gujarat and Orissa it is now Bihar," the editorial began. "The abduction and shameless vulgarity perpetrated on the person of a Catholic nun near Chhapra by 'unidentified miscreants' bears a disconcerting resemblance to attacks on missionaries elsewhere. Although the Bihar police say that the attack was the work of 'small-time criminals' and not the RSS, Bajrang Dal or other 'communal outfits', which are supposed to have no presence in the area, the available evidence strongly suggests that religious intolerance was the motivating factor. The attackers asked the nun why she and others of St. Joseph's convent were still in Chhapra and not back in Pondicherry. They threatened that she would be taught the 'lesson of her life' for converting Hindus and that this could even 'cost her her life'. She was then stripped, forced to drink their urine which was followed by attempted rape...."

The Pioneer examined the nun's story. It found that the report of even the team which the Congress(I) had sent had "come as a dampner to efforts to paint the incident as part of a wider conspiracy against Christians." The team seems to have taken the nun's version at face value, and proceeded on the premise that the incident had indeed occurred. But it had concluded that the assault was a symptom of growing lawlessness in Bihar – yet another instance of what had become an endemic feature of Bihar, crimes against women. The Director General of Police, K.A. Jacob, too said that the police did not detect any political or communal angle to the crime. He told the paper, "We have identified the criminals. They have no political connection."

Inquiries of *The Pioneer* itself yielded results which were even more telling. While reporting the allegations of the sister and one Father Cajetan of the Bettiah Diocese the paper

observed that the sister "spoke in Tamil and her words were translated by Father Cajetan." Its report proceeded to note,

> The Sister was all along briefed by a couple of Fathers who were not initially willing to let her speak. "Didn't they try to rape you and fail?," Father Cajetan asked her. The Sister reeled out some incoherent words in Tamil. "She said they tried to rape her and did not succeed," Father Cajetan said, adding that her hands were tied at the back. "It was when they failed to rape her that they forced her to drink urine," the Father added.
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> The FIR lodged by Sister Ruby also has the same version. After narrating how she was waylaid and stripped, the Sister said she was asked the following questions:
>
> 1. Is your convent still running in Jalalpur?
> 2. How many Sisters are there?
> 3. How many people have you converted to your religion?
> 4. What is your mother tongue?
> 5. Who asked you to come and work here?
> 6. Don't you know we have kidnapped, murdered and raped many people like you? Yet you have not learnt your lesson.
>
> However, there are several questions that remain unanswered. Sister Ruby filed an FIR three days after the incident. According to her report she was forced to answer the questions after being tied. She had also said that her abductors were speaking in Hindi and Bhojpuri. How could Sister Ruby, who spoke in Tamil and claimed not to know Hindi or English, understand her captors?
>
> That Sister admitted to have understood the questions and remembered them in order indicates she has a complete command over Hindi and Bhojpuri, and a very retentive memory. Her failure to even identify the place where she was reportedly taken after being waylaid does not quite jell with her graphic recounting of the incident itself. On September 24, the police spent an entire day going around with her. But she failed to spot the site even though the incident had taken place around 10 am....
>
> There are glaring contradictions in a press release issued by the Secretary of the Bishop of Bettiah and Sister Ruby's FIR. While the nun said she was forced to drink urine after her abductors failed to rape her, the release said she was threatened with rape if she refused to drink the urine. It is inconceivable how a frail woman could escape rape when she was stripped and tied.

> People, therefore, are wondering if something more heinous is being covered up. It becomes all the more relevant in view of Sister Ruby's delay in filing the FIR. The nun claims that she was disturbed both physically and mentally and had also to consult the Bishop of Bettiah before going to the police. Incidentally, the Bishop House at Bettiah has two telephones and is barely 60 km from Chhapra.
>
> To confound matters, Sister Ruby even admitted that the Bishop came to Chhapra a day after the incident. Presumably, the Bishop took another two days to discuss the matter with his superiors before lodging the FIR. It is difficult to imagine why the Church should take three days to allow a victim to report the case to the police. Didn't any one realize that the culprits could have escaped in the intervening period?
>
> The excuse given by the Sister has failed to convince the men in uniform. "Somehow we are not entirely sure about the whole story. Something is missing," said a police officer at the spot....[1]

Quite literally a replay of the story we had encountered earlier, "Orissa nun raped in moving car"! But the story was all over the newspapers, it was on Internet, it was on television channels!

In a word, we should be alert to the fact that missionaries have but one goal – that of harvesting us for the Church, and that they have developed a very well-knit, powerful, extremely well-endowed organizational network for attaining that singular goal. Their "spiritual" quest, their quest for power and control, their commercial interests are all entwined with, they are in fact dependent on that one goal – conversion.

In the last few decades, another goad has erupted. Converts who were enticed into Christianity by promises that it is free of notions like caste, are astir. They have been calling the Church to account for the lure it held out. To contain their restlessness, the Church is seeking to externalize the problem. As "Dalits" within the Church have begun to vent their disillusionment at the way the Church

[1] *The Sunday Pioneer*, 3 October, 1999.

itself has continued to discriminate against them, the Church has begun to espouse demands directed – ostensibly on their behalf – at the State. "Reservations for Christian Dalits," has been its latest campaign.

As in other campaigns it has launched, the Church has not thought twice of pressing all sorts of devices – including fraud – to advance this one. At the height of their campaign, they circulated a letter they said Mother Teresa had written to the then Prime Minister endorsing their demand that reservations be extended to "Christian Dalits". Mother Teresa's office denied that she had done so!

This recent campaign is quite a turn-around, and a typical one. For five hundred years, missionaries have denounced Hinduism for harbouring the notion of caste. One of their main selling points has been that there are no distinctions in Christianity, and that, therefore, by converting to Christianity the lower-caste Hindus would break out of social barriers.

And what has been the reality? The testimony of Christians themselves, testimony spread over seventy-eighty years, gives the lie to the claim.

What difference did conversion make?

In a memorandum they submitted to the Simon Commission, the Christian Depressed Classes of South India described what the Untouchables had achieved as a result of conversion to Christianity. They said,

> We are by religion Christians, both Roman Catholics and Protestants. Of the total population of Indian Christians of the Presidency the converts from the Depressed Classes form about sixty per cent.... In spite, however, of our Christian religion which teaches as fundamental truths the equality of man and man before God, the necessity of charity and love for neighbours and mutual sympathy and forbearance, we, the large number of Depressed Class converts remain in the same social condition as the Hindu Depressed Classes. Through the operation of several factors, the more important of them

being the strong caste retaining Hindu mentality of the converts to Christianity, and the indifference, powerlessness and apathy of the Missionaries, we remain today what we were before we became Christians – Untouchables – degraded by the laws of social position obtaining in the land, rejected by Caste Christians, despised by Caste Hindus and excluded by our own Depressed Class Hindu brethren. The small proportion of the Christians of South India, whose representatives are found in the Legislative Council, say, in Madras, are caste Christians, a term which sounds a contradiction, but which, unfortunately, is the correct and accepted description of high caste converts from Hinduism, who retain all the rigour and exclusiveness of caste. Particularly in the Mofussil parts and the villages, they who ought to be our fellow Christians follow all the orthodox severity and unreason of caste exclusion; they damn us 'Panchamas or Pariahs' and ignore our Christian claims and in the fullness of their affluence, power, prestige and position exclude us poorer Christians from society.... Frequent outbursts of anti-Panchama activity are the scandal of South Indian Christian life, and the least attempt on our part to better our lot, forward our progress and assert our elementary rights call down the wrath and fury of every man – official and non-official – Christian or Hindu, who claims a foolish superiority of birth. Denying the very foundations of Christianity, contrary to all love and charity and brotherhood, our 'fellow-Christians' treat us even in the Churches as Untouchables and Unapproachables, and relegate us to separate accommodation removed from their precincts and barricade their portions by means of iron rails and walls and fencings. There are several such churches.

In the matter of the reception of sacraments, a most ridiculous segregation is practised to avoid pollution; our claims to educate our children and train them for life are ruthlessly denied and through sheer prejudice our children are denied access to schools, convents, hostels, boarding houses, or if admitted, are assigned an ignominious accommodation. Tracing his descent from high caste Hindu progenitors the caste Christian looks for social status and position and finds favour in the eyes of his fellow caste-men, the Hindus. He treats the Depressed Class Christians in the same way as the Hindu Depressed Classes are treated by the Hindu Caste people.

Writing his essay, "The condition of the convert," in 1938, Ambedkar reproduced the passages as an accurate description. "This is a terrible indictment," he remarked. "It is

a relief to know that it does not apply to all parts of India nor does it apply to all denominations of Christians. The picture is more true of the Catholics than of the Protestants. It is more true of Southern India than it is of the Northern or even Central India. But the fact remains that Christianity has not succeeded in dissolving the feeling of caste from among the converts to Christianity. The distinction between touchables and untouchables may be confined to a corner. The Church School may be open to all. Still there is no gainsaying the fact that caste governs the life of the Christians as much as it does the life of the Hindus. There are Brahmin Christians and Non-Brahmin Christians. Among Non-Brahmin Christians there are Maratha Christians, Mahar Christians, Mang Christians and Bhangi Christians. Similarly in the South there are Pariah Christians, Malla Christians and Madiga Christians. They would not intermarry, they would not inter-dine. They are as much caste ridden as the Hindus are...."[2]

That was in 1938. Five decades later, Reverend John C.B. Webster cited a host of empirical studies by scholars which showed that discrimination was continuing within the Christian community. Separate places of worship, separate seating inside the Church, separate burial places, patronizing attitudes of Caste Christians, social segregation – use of one well for the converts from lower castes, use of caste names when addressing them, denial of services of the village barber, separate utensils for them in restaurants, marriage within caste.... Equally telling, he cited a number of studies that showed that caste continued to play a determining part in church politics, in church elections, in promotions within the church hierarchy. Studies showed that while progressive policies existed on paper, they were not better implemented within the church than they are in the rest of society....[3]

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[2]*Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Selected Speeches and Writings*, Volume V, Government of Maharashtra, 1989, pp. 445-78, at 454-56.

[3]John C.B. Webster, *The Dalit Christians, A History*, Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, Delhi, 1992, 1994, 1996, pp. 179-87.

That was in the early 1990s. The National Consultation on Mission that was held in 1994 in Pune acknowledged "the sinful neglect" of the lower castes within the church. Writing around the same time, Bishop Nirmal Minz reported as follows:

> Dalits had thought that Christianity as an egalitarian religion would solve their problems. Therefore many embraced Christianity. 75% of the Christians of India were drawn from Dalit socio-religious background. But to the utter dismay of the Dalit Christians, they have not been treated as per their expectations.
> The Christian doctrine of original sin which has been inherited from the first sin of Adam in the Garden of Eden had a very adverse effect on Dalit Christians. It is somewhat comparable to the doctrine of Karma in Hinduism....
> The Christian cultic practice has done enough damage to Dalit life. Priesthood, though open to all, yet the post and hierarchy of Christian priesthood cannot be held by Dalit Christians in corresponding proportion to their numerical strength in the churches. This could not take place even after more than one hundred years of Christianity in this community. There are instances of discrimination in seating during worship services, and in serving communion in the congregation of some churches. The Dalits are made to sit at the rear seats and they are served communion after the high caste converts to Christianity have received communion.
> Social discrimination in the church appears in subtle forms. In some churches voting systems, and candidates for election to some posts are skillfully maneuvered by the wealthy and clever high caste Christians. Marriage relationships between the high caste and Dalit Christians are rare. Even after death Dalits are buried in a separate section of the graveyard in some churches.
> Religion in its creedal, cultic and cultural expression had made Dalits victims of Hinduism and Christianity. In fact, Christian Dalits are twice alienated and the women among them thrice.
> The above discussion does not mean that Christianity did not do any good to the Dalits. It did. But it did to some individuals, and a few families only. But they too were coopted by the caste Christians.

> Dalits on the whole face the consequences of their being twice alienated....[4]

The Catholic Bishops' Conference of India had to devote an anxious session to this reality at its 1998 session in Varanasi. Bishop George Punnakottil observed,

> In recent years the problem of the Dalit Christians is brought to the attention of the church and the state. It seems that the church has not offered opportunities to the Dalit members to come up educationally and socially. As a result even after hundreds of years of their existence in the church, they remain on the periphery of the community. There are few priests and leaders of the church from the Dalit section. In the states of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, Bihar where majority of Christians are Dalits this problem is seriously felt. According to the reports, 70% of the Tamil Nadu Catholics are Dalits. It is reported that out of 14 Bishops in T.N. only one is Dalit. The percentage of Tamil priests is only 4%.
>
> There is no significant step taken by the church till recently to lift the socio-economic condition of the Dalits. Vocation from Dalit Christians have not been encouraged. A Dalit priest's feelings have been expressed in the following words: 'We do understand that vocation is from God, but it boggles our mind why He should choose His priests from non-Dalits only. Is God too casteist? Does He also practice untouchability?'....

To illustrate the internal condition of the Church the Bishop quoted the following observations of a Christian scholar about the Church in Tamil Nadu,

> The Catholic church in Tamil Nadu is a highly caste-conscious organization. It is organised around caste structures, identities and interests. Caste is ubiquitous in all the structures of social relationship

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[4]Bishop Nirmal Minz, "Dalits and Religion", in *Dalit Solidarity,* Bhagwan Das and James Massey, Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, Delhi, 1995, pp. 137-44, at 141-42.

> in the church, and forms the core of the language of social intercourse. Power, authority and patronage, all flow from the caste pipeline. The non-Dalits who are a minority in the church, create a system of social closure by means of which they monopolize all the positions of power and privilege in the church, and restrict access to resources and opportunities to the majority, the Dalit Catholics, who form 70% of the total Catholic population in Tamil Nadu. There are people who say the Tamil church is plagued with casteism. 'We are injected skillfully with fear, inferiority complexes, servility, subservience, helplessness, despair and abasement.'....

"Coming to the Church, the lower castes had hoped to find their dignity and rights as human beings," we are told. "But it proved to be an illusion...."[5]

A terrible indictment, as Ambedkar said. An unchanging picture over the entire century. And that on a matter which has all along been one of the principal selling points of the church to its target peoples. Resentment within the Church has become rage. All the more so because of something the Church has been doing for the last two decades: to widen the fault-lines within Hindu society, the Church has been patronizing those Scheduled Caste "leaders" who have been the most abusive in their denunciations of our society, those who have struck the most extreme positions in regard to it. Their activities and hectoring have been projected as the rising consciousness of Dalits.

But whatever has risen, has not remained confined to Scheduled Castes within the Hindu fold. It has also inflamed those who had left Hinduism in the hope of breaking out of discrimination. Accordingly, there has been a near-implosion within the Church. To deflect the wrath of these millions whom it has disillusioned, the Church has sought to

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[5]Bishop George Punnakottil, "The role of the church in the context of the church in India today," in *Report of the CBCI General Body Meeting, (Varanasi, March 21-28, 1998)*, Catholic Bishops' Conference of India, New Delhi, pp. 186-202, at pp. 197-202.

externalize the problem: deflect the demands the "Dalits" within the Church are making by converting them into demands on the State – that has been its device.

We must, therefore, be vigilant to this new impulse. It is not compassion for the downtrodden which has led the Church to suddenly espouse the cause of "Christian Dalits" It is the fear that unless they are seen to be doing so, the converts would begin deserting them. And the calculation that once they can assure the potential convert that he would not lose any of the benefits that State policies now confer on him, they would have another argument that would help wean him away from Hinduism.

Consequences of ignoring the law

A lesson of an entirely different order is brought home most forcefully by Justice Wadhwa's findings in regard to the Orissa law that bears on conversions. As has been noted earlier, Orissa passed a law in 1967 to regulate conversions. It is known as the Orissa Freedom of Religion Act. Its constitutionality – as well as that of the allied law in Madhya Pradesh – has been upheld by a five judge Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court in *Rev. Stainislaus v. State of Madhya Pradesh* [*AIR 1977 SC 908*]. Among other things, the law provides, "No person shall convert or attempt to convert, either directly or otherwise, any person from one religious faith to another by use of force or by inducement or by any fraudulent means, nor shall any person abet such conversion." Anyone doing so, the Act provides, shall be punished by imprisonment of up to one year and/or a fine of Rs. 5,000. In case the offence relates to a minor, a woman or a person belonging to the Scheduled Castes or Tribes, the punishment shall be double.

To prevent misuse, the Act provides that the offence shall not be investigated by an officer below the rank of an

Inspector of Police, and that no prosecution shall be instituted without the sanction of the Magistrate of the District or an equivalent authority.

The Act was passed in 1967. Rules under it were not framed till November, 1989, Justice Wadhwa notes. The Rules are salutary, and will repay a moment's attention:

> 3(i) Each District Magistrate shall maintain a list of religious institutions or organizations propagating religious faith in his district and that of persons directly or indirectly engaged for propagation of religious faith in the district.
> (ii) The District Magistrate, if he thinks fit, may call for a list of persons with the religious faith, receiving benefits either in cash or in kind from the religious organizations or institutions or from any person connected therewith.
> 4. Any person intending to convert his religion shall give a declaration before a Magistrate, 1st Class, having jurisdiction prior to such conversion that he intends to convert his religion on his own will.
> 5(i) The concerned religious priest shall intimate the date, time and place of the ceremony in which conversion shall be made along with the names and addresses of the persons to be converted to the concerned District Magistrate before fifteen days of the said ceremony.
> (ii) The intimation shall be in Form A and shall be delivered either personally by the Priest to the concerned District Magistrate or sent to him by registered post with acknowledgment due.
> 6. The District Magistrate on receiving the intimation from the priest shall sign thereon stating the date on which and the hour at which the intimation has been delivered to him or received by him, and shall forthwith acknowledge the receipt thereof in Form B.
> 7. The District Magistrate shall maintain a register of conversion in Form C and shall cover therein particulars of the intimation received by him.
> 8. Any person who contravenes the provisions of Rule 5 or 6 shall be liable to a fine of Rupees one thousand.
> 9. The District Magistrate shall by the 10th of each month send to the State Government a report of intimations received by him during the preceding month in Form D.

One reform is obvious at once. Under the Act, penalties for disregard and violation are so minor that they cry out to be multiplied manifold. As conversions are triggering such intense tensions, what is the rationale for limiting punishments to fines of a thousand or five, to imprisonment of one or two years?

The more serious lesson lies in what Justice Wadhwa reports about what this law means on the ground. He records,

> No one was aware of the Freedom of Religion Act or the Rules framed thereunder in the State at least in the districts of Mayurbhanj and Keonjhar. These provisions of law were lying dormant and [had] never [been] put into operation for the last many years. Admittedly, there were conversions to Christianity in these two districts. No person intending to convert his religion ever gave a declaration before a Magistrate prior to such conversion of his intent to convert his religion on his own will which was the requirement of Rule 4. Similarly also the religious priest did not give intimation of such conversion as per Form A under the Rules. District Magistrate did not maintain a register of conversion as per Form prescribed. Since they did not make any record of conversions, they did not send any report of conversion to the State Government.
>
> Mr. Balakrishnan, District Magistrate, Mayurbhanj and Mr. Saurabh Garg, District Magistrate, Keonjhar were examined to know if any action [had been] taken under the Freedom of Religion Act and the Rules framed thereunder. They expressed ignorance of the provisions of the law relating to conversion and said they had become aware of these only after the incident at Manoharpur on the night of 22/23.1.1999. To me, it appears that even now they do not understand the full scope and intent of the provisions of the Orissa Freedom of Religion Act and the Rules. These are salutary provisions and prohibit conversion from one religion to another by the use of force, inducement or by any fraudulent means. Even any abetment to such conversion has been made an offence. If these provisions of law, in my view, are strictly followed no one can have any grievance to contend that gullible and innocent tribals are being converted.

The Commission asked the Advocate General for a report on

prosecutions under the Act. From 1967 to 1990, the Advocate General informed the Commission, the Act was not enforced as its constitutional *vires* had been challenged. Since then – that is, in nine years – 10 cases had been registered. In one case, the accused had been discharged. In one case, he had been acquitted. In regard to two the Final Report had been submitted. And six were pending trial.

The lesson – a cruel one – leaps at us: as this is the attitude of the State machinery to law, the Dara Singhs will continue to become heroes with the local population.

Thus, we should have an Orissa-type law throughout the country to regulate conversions. And we should ensure that all adhere to it strictly.

The basic lessons

But the basic lessons go beyond these. That those officials in Orissa did not even know the law is but a symptom – of a State that has become too enfeebled to even attempt to attend to the problems that confront it.

Large parts in the Northeast are being inundated by Bangladeshis. But the State can do nothing: therefore, instead of rounding up the infiltrators, it pounces on the distinguished Governor of Assam, a former Deputy Chief of Staff of the Army no less, when he sends a report to the President that the inundation has assumed such proportions that it now constitutes a threat to the security of the country.

Justice Wadhwa reproduces statements of officers testifying to the fact that Dara Singh was being looked upon as a hero by the people of the area. Instead of paying heed to the warning, instead of finding out why the people of the area have come to look upon one who is taking such murderous steps against missionaries as a hero, activists launch a campaign attacking the judge!

When in the wake of the murder Reverend Arul Doss the

Home Secretary of Orissa says that tension had risen in the area as Catholic priests were "trying to split families after converting tribals" and others, instead of p.ıying heed to the warning, activists begin shouting that the Home Department be taken away from the officer!

To maintain their hold over their flock, aggressive leaders of Muslims make the *shariat* an instrument in their politics of separateness. Instead of defanging them, the State makes *not abiding by* the constitutional directive for a common civil code a principle.

In Kashmir, Pakistan orchestrates the rhetoric of separateness into the shriek of separation. Instead of taking steps to integrate the region further into India, the State makes it a principle that it will *not* abide by the constitutional expectation of doing away with Article 370.

Those officers of Orissa typify not just the State, but also society – a people who have been totally confused by fifty years of perverted propaganda: the combined result of the near-stranglehold over the media of secularists on the one hand, and of the slavishness of the Indian intellectual class on the other. So deep has been the effect of this combination that our literati hesitate to endorse steps required even to crush terrorists. They typify a society that has lost the capacity to face the truth, of a State that has lost the strength to enfôrce the laws it as enacted.

Contrast this cravenness in the face of fabrications by missionaries and the media regarding "atrocities" on missionaries with the position in Islamic countries. There no Christian missionary may attempt to convert a Muslim. Have you encountered our progressive intellectuals censuring this? Similarly, compare the conditiọn we have encountered in this survey with the following news item from Israel:

CNN Networks
31 March 1998
Web posted at: 03:23 GST, New York Times (23:23 GMT)

50 Christian groups promise no missionary activity in Israel
JERUSALEM (AP) Representatives of 50 Christian evangelical groups have agreed to make an unprecedented joint statement promising not to carry out missionary activity in Israel.
As a result, Israeli legislator Nissim Zvili said Monday he would drop his sponsorship of an anti-proselytizing bill that has drawn protests from Christians around the world.
"This is better than a law," Zvili told *The Associated Press*, "This is a very big accomplishment."
In the statement, the Christian groups say they "rejoice in the presence of the Jewish people in this country of their ancestors" and agree to avoid "activities which..... alienated them from their tradition and community."
Missionary activity touches a particularly raw nerve in the Jewish state, home to 300,000 Holocaust survivors. Some Jewish groups have accused Christian churches of apathy or complicity in the Nazi attempt to exterminate European Jews.
Clarence Wagner, director of the evangelical foundation Bridges for Peace, said the joint statement was an important step toward understanding between Jews and Christians. "We don't believe that we have been or are in any way a threat to the Jewish people," he said. The proposed anti-proselytizing bill would have banned possession of any written material that proselytizes which some Christians feared could be used to ban possession of the New Testament.
Zvili said he had proposed the bill after receiving a proselytizing tract in the mail.

Or, contrast the pounding we are subjected to in spite of the freedom that missionaries are accorded in India with what the law is in China in this regard.

On 31 January, 1994, China promulgated its Decree, "Regulations governing the religious activities of foreign nationals within China." The Decree declares its object to be "to protect the freedom of religious belief of foreign nationals in China *and to safeguard the public interest.*" It allows foreign nationals to participate "in religious activities", adding that they may participate in such activities *"in religious venues"*. They may discuss the scriptures and

preach, it says, but "*at the invitation of a religious body at or above the provincial, autonomous region or municipality level.*" Foreign nationals may hold religious activities, the Decree says, but *"for other foreign nationals"!* And only *"at venues recognized by the Bureaus of the People's Government at or above the county level."*

When they enter China foreign nationals may bring printed materials as well as audio and visual materials and other religious items, the Decree says, adding that they are allowed to bring these *"for their personal use."* If the materials are brought in quantities which exceed what is required of personal use, it says, the materials "will be dealt with according to the relevant Chinese customs regulations." Moreover, materials of this kind *"whose content is harmful to the public interest are forbidden"* – and, of course, it is the State which shall determine whether the material is liable to harm the public interest or not.

Article 8 of the Decree specifies,

> Foreign nationals who engage in religious activities in China must respect Chinese laws and regulations. *They are not permitted to establish religious organizations, liaison offices, and venues for religious activities or run religious schools and institutes within China, they are not allowed to recruit believers among Chinese citizenry, appoint clergy or undertake other evangelistic activity.*

Article 9 is just as unambiguous, just as stern:

> The Bureaus of Religious Affairs at or above the county level or other offices concerned *should act to dissuade and put a stop to religious activities of foreign nationals which violate this regulation.* If the violation constitutes an immigration offence or a matter of public security, *the public security organs will dispense penalties according to the law*; if the violation constitutes a crime, *the judiciary will investigate to determine where criminal responsibility lies.*[6]

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[6]For the text of the Decree see, Charles D. Paglee, Chinalaw Web, http://www.qis.net/chinalaw/prclaw109.htm.

And that is just the formal law The "situation on the ground," as the phrase goes, is much harsher: yet none of the persons and organizations that traduce us in India, and certainly no progressive of ours so much as bleats about China in this regard!

Therefore, the basic lesson of this survey is: clear the national mind, develop a strong and purposeful State.

To clear our society's mind on the subject of this survey, the important things are ones each of us can do on his own.

Just read the publications of the missionaries.

In particular, read the Bible.

Read what is common knowledge about it in Europe. Make that known all across our country.

At each opportunity, question the missionaries about what is contained in the Bible, and about what scholars in advanced Christian countries have written about it.

This little bit, a bit that lies within the reach of each of us, will by itself be a substantial enough antidote.

Index

To conserve space, as passages from the Old and New Testaments are cited throughout the book, pages on which they appear have not been listed here.

Acknowledgements

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"Just as in the first millennium the Cross was planted on the soil of Europe, and in the second on that of the Americas and Africa, we can pray that in the third Christian millennium a great harvest of faith will be reaped in this vast and vital continent," declared the Pope in *Ecclesia in Asia* that he released in Delhi in November, 1999. The synod is "an ardent affirmation of faith in Jesus Christ the Saviour, and it remains a call to conversion.....," he told the assembled Bishops and Cardinals. He fervently endorsed the call of his Bishops, "the heart of the Church in Asia will be restless until the whole of Asia finds its rest in the peace of Christ, the Risen Lord."

How come our secularists insist that conversion is not the aim of the Church when the Church repeatedly and explicitly declares that the singular aim of all its activities is to convert non-Christians to Christianity, and thereby harvest souls for Jesus? When it explicitly declares that a conversion is genuine to the extent that the new convert brings in other converts? How does the Church pursue this goal in the face of the Supreme Court's emphatic verdict that the freedom to propagate does not include freedom to convert, that conversion is in fact an assault on the freedom of conscience that our Constitution guarantees to the persons the proselytizers target?

"But how can we disregard the command in the Gospels of our Lord Jesus Christ to do so?," the missionaries exclaim. How come missionaries, having projected their Lord as superior on the ground, *inter alia*, that he was a figure of history while our Gods are just mythical figures, how come these very missionaries now suddenly turn around and say, "But it is the figure of faith you have to focus on"? What happens when we *do* focus on Jesus as "a figure of faith"?

For 500 years the Church has heaped calumny on our Gods – Krishna was a thief, Rama lied, Shiva..... How does the God of their scripture measure up on their own criteria? Having created the entire universe, with its infinite space and time, with its innumerable galaxies, why, as Tom Paine asked, is He so obsessed with whether this puny little man on this speck of an earth is worshipping any entity other than Him? Why is He so totally ineffective in getting even His chosen people to worship Him and Him alone? On the telling of the Christian scripture itself, is He compassionate, all-knowing, all-powerful?

God eclipsed by his Son. The Son eclipsed by the Church....

Having condemned us for 500 years as idolaters, how come the Church has its devotees worship idols of Mary and Jesus? And the relics of its saints?

Holding as they do that salvation is possible only through Christianity, that all non-Christians are condemned to eternal hell-fire, how do missionaries don the cloak of ecumenism? What did Vatican-II actually say? If all faiths lead to salvation, what is the ground for conversion? Forget other faiths, how come the Pope, talking of fellow-Christians, talks of "the rapacious wolves" of Protestantism?

How do the claims of missionaries – that Jesus was the "Son of God", that he was born to a virgin at the intercession of God, that he was crucified – stand in the face of the emphatic declaration in that other scripture which is also said to have been sent down directly by God, the Quran, that to ascribe a Son to God is to blaspheme God?

A book that shows up the claims of missionaries, that nails their design, that bares their technology. A book that sets out what should be done.

A must for our times, a must for strengthening our country.

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